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**SCHOOL COUNCILS: BRIDGING THE RELATIONAL GAPS BETWEEN
SCHOOLS, PARENTS AND COMMUNITIES**

BY

SHELLY ANN PEPLER



A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfilment
of the requirements for the degree of

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled *School Councils: Bridging the Relational Gaps Between Schools, Parents and Communities* submitted by Shelly Ann Pepler in partial fulfilment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Administration.

September 10, 1999

This dissertation is dedicated to my father,

Victor Robert Pepler

a man whose genius, power and magic
has inspired me throughout
my lifetime.

Thank you for your many gifts of love,
including your love of literature,
knowledge and, above all,
learning.



*Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it now.
Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now.*
Goethe

ABSTRACT

In 1994, as a means to increase parental involvement and decision making in schools, the government of Alberta legislated the establishment of *school councils* for all publically funded schools in the province. This study addressed the experiences and perceptions of school council members in two school sites involved in early implementation efforts. They included principals, school council chairpersons, teacher representatives, parent representatives and the district superintendent.

Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews that were audio-taped and transcribed. The study was guided by the following questions: (1) What is the reality of school council participation for parents, teachers and principals in Willow Ridge and Daviston Composite Schools? How does this reality compare with past research? (2) What enabling or limiting factors of participation are identified by the respondents in these two sites? How do respondents deal with those factors? (3) What, if any, changes in influence relationships occurred for respondents in this study? How are those changes, or lack of changes, explained?

The study revealed very little in the way of influence changed in the school district. Those with the greatest comfort and knowledge of the education system (teachers and principals) continued to exert the most influence. Parents, especially those who were deemed by others or themselves to have limited knowledge of schools, were welcome to participate in both councils. Nevertheless, it was questionable how seriously others sought their ideas on salient policy issues. The study also found school councils tended to be under-represented, with little or no representation from ethnic or lower

socioeconomic segments of their communities. Respondents indicated a continuing frustration with the uncertainty of their role, especially as it related to the scope and legality of their responsibilities.

One theme, relations, emerged from the study and was supported by three sub-themes—knowledge and power, trust and distrust, and uncertainty and belief.

Recommendations for theory, practice and research addressed ways that schools could bridge the relational gaps that exist between schools and communities, professionals and parents, and the roles and expectations of school council members.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

In January 1994, the Government of Alberta announced its intentions to alter the way in which public education in the province was managed and provided. Among those initiatives were consolidation of school districts, equitable funding, greater accountability and increased parental involvement in decision making. Formally introduced into the legislature in May, the School Amendment Act, 1994, was deemed by the Government to be an important step in the restructuring of education in the province. Halvar Jonson, Minister of Education, noted:

Our restructuring of the education system will give more authority to parents and schools, focus our education resources on students in the classroom, and ensure adequate funding for quality basic education. The amendments to the School Act being introduced today are an important step in turning that vision into reality. (Alberta Education, March 31, 1994)

A tremendous amount of controversy, however, surrounded the proposed amendments. One of the most controversial of those amendments dealt with school councils, the topic of this study. Identified as the vehicle through which parents and the community would be able to exercise more decision making authority, the effect of the legislation was to create a wide diversity of opinion, with both professionals and laypersons questioning its advantages and disadvantages.

The concept of school councils was not new to Alberta having been introduced in the 1988 School Act. The 1994 legislation, however, introduced substantial changes to the roles and responsibilities of council members. Key to that new legislation was that school councils were to be given the authority to make and implement policies in a number of areas. Those included, but were not limited to, the nature of the programs offered, expenditure of money, educational standards to be met by students, and the management of the school (Legislative Assembly of the Province of Alberta, 1994).

In December 1994, when the data for this study were gathered, most districts in the province were not yet at the implementation stage. The Kettle Creek School District,

however, was an anomaly in that they were not only implementing school councils but establishing roles and responsibilities for their new entities. Because of my knowledge of that district and interest in its implementation efforts, I chose that site as the basis for my study.

Background to the Study

School Councils in Alberta

The history and development of school councils in Alberta have featured a great deal of public consultation and indecision. First introduced into legislation in 1988, school councils were deemed to be advisory in nature and formed at the discretion of a school's parent body. A 1990 government survey (Alberta Education, 1991) determined there was a large discrepancy in functions being served by school councils. It also identified communication between stakeholder groups, parent apathy and difficulty in enacting changes in programming or facilities as concerns needing to be addressed.

In the fall of 1993, the government organized a series of public consultations on the future of education in Alberta. It was the first time the government had brought all the various stakeholder groups together to discuss and debate this issue. Emanating from those meetings, referred to as "the roundtables," was Bill 19. Introduced in March 1994, Bill 19 outlined a comprehensive package of amendments to restructure education in Alberta. Included in those changes were (a) making school councils compulsory, (b) giving them decision making responsibilities for ensuring the school's fiscal management and that students met the standards of education set by the Minister, and (c) granting them authority to make and implement policies on the nature of programs offered, expenditure of money, educational standards, and the management of the school (Legislative Assembly of the Province of Alberta, 1994).

According to A. Hildebrandt, assistant to the deputy minister of education, the reaction to Bill 19 was mixed (personal communication, June 28, 1996). For as she noted,

Some people were very excited about the possibility of getting really involved in

school policy and school decision making. This was also the time when they announced the amalgamation of school boards, so a number of people took it to what they thought was the logical next step, that this in fact was going to be the abolishment of school boards. So, yes, there was a real reaction. We were getting calls from people who felt very threatened—school trustees. We were also getting calls and letters from people who thought this was the greatest idea in the world.

Bill 19 passed third reading in the legislature and was printed in the School Act consolidation. However, it was never proclaimed in the House and regulations governing the operation of school councils were also not released as intended. As a result, the proposed amendments were not legal or binding in Alberta schools and the previous legislation governing school councils remained in effect. Nevertheless, many districts, including the Kettle Creek School District, used the amendments introduced in Bill 19 as the focus for their implementation efforts.

In the spring of 1994, the consultation process continued with a second series of roundtables. Various stakeholder groups were asked to respond to the intended roles and responsibilities of school councils as outlined in Bill 19. Analysis of those data (Western Management Consultants, 1994) indicated that the vast majority of respondents did not support an increased decision making role for school councils. Respondents believed they should continue to be advisory in nature, with the roles and responsibilities determined locally by parents, community and the school staff. The principal was also identified as a key participant in the operation and effectiveness of the school council.

For the second time in less than a year, however, the government passed legislation prior to the completion of a consultation process. In May 1994, new legislation was announced that mandated a strong decision making role for school councils, similar to that introduced in Bill 19. Reaction to the new legislation was swift, with many individuals and groups complaining that the government had ignored the results of its own consultation process. The government responded by releasing a position paper on the roles and responsibilities of school councils in November 1994. More than 1000 responses were received by the government in response to that paper. As part of the field study component of my doctoral program, I was given responsibility for

collating and analyzing responses to the position paper. It was during this time that I began collecting data for this research.

Coming to the Question

When I reflected upon my own experiences as a principal working with a school council, I recalled members who were very much “information gatherers” with many questions about what we were doing at the school. But I did not recall them being interested in managing the school or making decisions that might fall under the guise of “professional expertise.” As I continued to reflect upon this, however, I began to wonder whether my interpretations were accurate. In particular, I began to question whether those parents might have wanted more involvement but felt limited by a lack of understanding or opportunity.

As I began to explore the literature on school councils, I was intrigued by the influence that professionals, and in particular, principals, had on parental involvement in decision making. I could not help but wonder if I and the other professionals on the council had limited the experiences of our parent representatives. If given the choice and opportunity to exercise more decision making authority, would the parent representatives on that council have been more actively involved in issues related to management, curriculum or teaching? And while it was not possible for me to turn back the clock to find answers to those questions, it did inspire me to explore those and other questions relating to parental involvement in decision making. In particular, I wanted to know how individuals understood their involvement on school councils and what issues they saw as detracting from or enhancing that involvement.

As I thought about a site for my own study, I knew that I wanted a district that was actively pursuing school council implementation, despite the confusion and frustration surrounding the 1994 legislation. During my work with the position paper analysis, I became aware that the Kettle Creek School District was taking a pro-active stance on school council implementation. I was familiar with that district, having taught and been a school administrator in that district for 10 years. However, I had left the

district in 1993 and was not aware of their recent efforts with school councils. Apprised of those efforts and interested in learning more about them, I requested and received permission from the superintendent to do my study in the Kettle Creek School District.

Significance of the Study

Site-based decision making (SBDM), of which school councils are but one component, has been the focus of much study during the past fifteen years (e.g., Brown, 1990; David, 1989; Malen, Ogawa & Kranz, 1990). Throughout many parts of the world, SBDM has been advanced as a strategy to improve education by transferring significant decision making authority from state, provincial or district offices to individual schools. According to Brown (1990), a change to school-based decision making implies greater flexibility in decision making, changes in role accountability (particularly for the principal) and the potential enhancement of school productivity.

Crump and Eltis (1995) believed the devolution of decision making authority places greater responsibility on schools and their leaders to gain the active participation of parents and community members, and to be more publicly accountable to them. Throughout Canada and many parts of the world, the introduction of school councils has been advanced as a means to achieve those outcomes (Rideout, 1995).

The significance of this study is that it focuses upon early implementation efforts in Alberta when school councils were moving from purely advisory councils to those with decision making authority. In doing so, it provides insight into the experiences and perceptions of parents, principals and teachers involved in those changes. An understanding of the factors that enhance or limit participation in those change efforts will add to the knowledge base.

Because the study also addresses changes in influence relationships, it will add to our understanding of how policy initiatives affect individuals at the interpersonal and organizational levels. This understanding is important, given the increased emphasis upon decentralized and collaborative approaches to decision making at the local school level. And, because much of the research indicates that mandated forms of parental

involvement in decision making often do little to disrupt the traditional influence patterns in schools (Malen & Ogawa, 1988), this study may provide additional insight in that area.

This study is also significant because it illuminates difficulties associated with establishing school councils that are truly representative of their communities. The provincial legislation governing school councils assumes they are representative, however, as this study points out, that is often not the case. Understanding why significant segments of a school's community are under-represented may provide others with the knowledge necessary to address that issue.

Purpose of the Study

My purpose in studying two school councils in the Kettle Creek School District was to understand the experiences and perceptions of those involved in its early implementation efforts. In doing so, I wanted to understand the problems, prospects, pitfalls and prerequisites for success faced by members of those councils. Because of the recent changes in decision making authority, I was interested in determining whether these individuals perceived any changes in their level of influence. Given my awareness of the superintendent's role in the district's early implementation efforts, I was also interested in understanding his involvement.

Statement of the Problem

The following questions guided my inquiry into this study.

*What was the reality of school council participation for parents, teachers and principals in Willow Ridge and Daviston Composite schools?
How does this reality compare with past research?*

*What enabling or limiting factors of participation are identified by the respondents in these two sites?
How do respondents deal with those factors?*

*What, if any, changes in influence relationship occurred for respondents in this study?
How are those changes, or lack of changes, explained?*

Description of Terms

Parent Advisory Councils and *School Councils* are terms which are often used interchangeably to refer to formal parent groups which meet regularly with school administrator(s) to discuss matters of concern to parents. For the purposes of this study, I have made the following distinctions in order to differentiate the types of decision making authority granted to the two entities. The two definitions are as follows:

School Councils are collective associations of parents, teachers, principals, staff and community representatives as defined by the School Amendment Act, 1994 (Legislative Assembly of the Province of Alberta, 1994). According to this legislation, a school council shall advise the principal on any matter relating to the school and may make and implement policies regarding the nature of programs offered, expenditure of money, educational standards and the management of the school.

Parent Advisory Councils are collective associations of parents, teachers, principals and staff formed prior to the 1994 legislation. They are advisory in nature and their establishment is at the discretion of parents of children attending that school. School boards govern their establishment, election procedures and dissolution. They do not have the authority to make policies relating to educational programs or the fiscal management of the school.

School-Based Management (SBM) and *Site-Based Decision Making (SBDM)* are two terms that are used interchangeably to refer to the devolution of authority to the local school site. For the purposes of this study, I have differentiated between the two terms.

SBM is meant to be an encompassing term describing a form of decentralization that identifies the individual school as the primary unit of improvement. It relies on the redistribution of decision making authority to stimulate and sustain improvements at that level (Malen et al., 1990). *SBM* provides principals, teachers, students, and parents greater control over the education process by giving them more responsibilities for the budget, personnel and curriculum. *SBM* has been the centrepiece in the broader school restructuring agenda of the 1990s and typically includes the creation of school-site councils (Leithwood and Menzies, 1998).

SBDM refers to one aspect of the more encompassing term, school-based management. *SBDM* focuses on issues associated with decision making roles and relationships. Commitment, trust and a sense of ownership are examples of issues that affect this aspect of restructuring. In this study, many issues arise from the processes and outcomes associated with extending decision making to parents and teacher representatives on school councils.

Assumptions

I believe two sets of assumptions were important to this study. The first set dealt with participants while the second set dealt with personal assumptions. With respect to the participants, my assumptions were that they were able to accurately relate their perceptions and experiences and that they were open and honest in doing so. I also assumed that an interpretive study was an appropriate design in which to share those understandings.

As a researcher and educator with prior experiences as a principal and a member of a school council, I believe it is also important to acknowledge personal assumptions about parental involvement in decision making and principals' perceptions of that involvement. I believe the study was informed by my belief that many principals support a role for parents in decision making. However, I believe many also struggle to involve parents in ways that are meaningful yet respectful of the professional knowledge or expertise of their staffs.

Limitations

According to Rudestam and Newton (1992), limitations are restrictions in the study over which you have no control. In this study, I identified three limitations. The first potential limitation was the inability to include a greater number of parent representatives in the study. As is, only five of the twenty-three parent representatives on the two councils participated in the study. This occurred because only those expressing an interest in the study were included and the fact that only those who were available to

be interviewed on a given weekend were included in the study. Also, because of injuries I received in a car accident shortly following the data gathering, it was not possible for me to return to the site to gather further data. In fact, it required me to put a temporary hold on my data analysis. It was not until 1998 that I was able to return to the study.

Once I did, I discovered that the limited number of parent representatives in the study was not as serious a limitation as I originally thought. A review of the composition of the two councils revealed that most parent participants shared similar backgrounds to those who were not included in the study. In one council, the majority of council members, whether they participated in the study or not, were influential members of the community with close ties to the school jurisdiction. In the other council, they were Metis people with grave fears about public education. The similarity in composition between members that were and were not interviewed led me to believe that I may have reached the satiation point in my sampling procedures, despite my initial concern about the small number of parent representatives participating in the study.

A second limitation was the inability to observe either of the two school councils in action. I intended to observe the Daviston council during the time that I was doing interviews in that community. However, due to an unforeseen change in the date of the council meeting, that observation did not take place. Given time constraints and my own health, I was not able to reschedule that observation. Nor was I able to make a return trip to observe the Willow Ridge council in session as they were not meeting during the time my interviews were scheduled in that community. However, I did collect minutes from both councils' previous meetings during that school year and I found them most helpful in setting a context for the participants' comments.

The third limitation to the study was my presence in the district. I was a former colleague of both principals in the study and was known to some of the other participants, including the superintendent and two teacher respondents. I did not, however, live or work in either of the communities featured in this study. I had not met the chairs or parent representative before; however, they were aware of my former association with the district. And while I do not believe any respondents were misleading with their

comments, I questioned whether the lack of negative or critical commentary from two respondents reflected my past association with the district. Given the political nature of schools, and the importance placed upon school council implementation in the district, I felt they may have chosen to be less critical because of a concern that their words might reflect unfavourably upon themselves or others.

Delimitations

Rudestam and Newton (1992) noted that delimitations are limitations on the research that have been deliberately imposed. In this study, I delimited the number of school councils and participants. Since it was not my intent to generalize to all school councils in the province or the Kettle Creek School District, I limited my study to one superintendent and eight members of two school councils. And, in order to focus on school council members' perceptions of changes in influence level, I chose to delimit the study to those individuals who were members of the two councils. Others who may have been affected by the change, such as school trustees, the general parent population, or students were not included.

Organization of the Dissertation

The dissertation is divided into five chapters. Chapter 2 is a review of the relevant literature on site-based decision making, principals' involvement in change, and school councils. Chapter 3 provides a description of, and rationale for, the specific method used in this qualitative study. The methodological principles, research design, data collection procedures and procedures used to ensure methodological rigour are presented. Chapter 4 features the study's findings in a category and theme format. In Chapter 5, the final chapter, I present a brief summary of the study, reflections from the literature and the study, and implications for future practice and research.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

With the passing of the School Amendment Act in the spring of 1994, the Alberta Government heralded a massive restructuring of the provincial education system. This restructuring initiative, however, was not limited to Alberta, for as a quick scan of international magazines and periodicals indicated, governments around the world were introducing substantive educational reforms. Site-based decision making in which authority in key decision making areas was devolved from the district level to the local school level was synonymous with such change. According to many proponents, how schools would be managed in the future would change as organizational structures, power bases and professional relationships underwent transformation.

This chapter provides an overview of the literature regarding educational restructuring and professional-lay relationships specific to site-based decision making and school councils. Specifically, this literature review examines: (a) the nature of restructuring and site-based decision making, (b) the role of the principal in implementing change, (c) issues pertaining to parental involvement in education, and (d) issues concerning school council implementation in Alberta and other parts of the world.

Restructuring and Site-Based Decision Making

Site-based decision making (SBDM) is a strategy to improve education by transferring significant decision making authority from provincial, state or district offices to individual schools. It is intended to provide principals, teachers, students and parents with greater control over the education process by giving them responsibility for decisions about budget, personnel and the curriculum. Its key premise is that the involvement of teachers, parents and other community members in these key areas can create more effective learning environments for children.

History and Development

School councils have been the centrepiece in the broader restructuring agenda of

the 1990s (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998). Much of the literature devoted to understanding the restructuring of education, and in particular, the devolution of power to the school site, comes from studies of school systems in New Zealand, the state of Victoria in Australia, Great Britain, and the Chicago Public Schools. Many theories have been advanced to explain this recent phenomenon, with Lawton (1992) noting a growing crisis in legitimation as being one explanation.

Based upon the theory advanced by Habermas, Lawton (1992) saw this reflected in a growing public concern about whether schools could effectively and equitably carry out their perceived responsibilities. Adding to the legitimation crisis was the belief that existing structures of governance and administration were incapable of addressing the technical and structural shortcomings of the public education system. According to Lawton (p. 141), one chief benefit of decentralization, in which authority for decision making was returned to a local governing body or school council, was that it returned the problem of legitimacy to the individuals whose lack of confidence in the system created the initial demand for change.

In reflecting upon the move to local governance of schools in Great Britain, Bacon (1978) noted "a slow but steadily growing recognition that many schools have become too isolated from the communities they were built to serve" (p. 2). Lindelow, Coursen and Mazzarello (1985, p. 150), supported this belief, proposing that the traditional bureaucratic structure of schooling has created a belief that individuals within the system, as well as those affected by its decisions, are "incapable, unqualified, or uninterested in contributing to the organisation's decision-making process." Hess (1992, p. 140) described the move as a means to "ventilate the system," a system in which professionals are viewed as being too professionally oriented and protective of their own interests at the expense of students.

Malen et al. (1990), in their extensive review of site-based management studies, noted that such initiatives tended to surface during times of intense stress. They identified those times as when broad publics were criticizing school performance and when fiscal conditions created contentious retrenchment issues such as school closures,

work force reductions and program cuts. According to Malen et al., “a turbulent environment generates a host of highly salient demands and the system is pressed to search for solutions to a cluster of seemingly intractable problems” (p. 297).

During the 1990s, Canadian education came under intense public scrutiny following the release of a number of international test score comparisons. During this same time period, many Canadian provinces introduced legislation mandating site-based decision making. School councils, seen as an important element of SBDM, were intended to empower parents, teachers and other stakeholders in local decision making. Such involvement was seen as increasing support and accountability for public education, higher quality decisions, improved academic achievement, and, increased communication among stakeholder groups, including school boards, superintendents, principals, teachers, parents, community members and students (Brown, 1990).

In a research project I conducted during 1994, educators and government officials were asked to give reasons for the recent restructuring of education in Alberta. Some respondents referred to a “very right-wing, privatized agenda” and an “ideological right that says the state has no role in the education of children,” while others noted a growing disenchantment with an unresponsive public school system that was unable to “fix itself.” The following comment, made by a source within the provincial department of education, reflected those thoughts.

I think the issue probably lies around parents feeling their children are not getting the education they should be getting. This is what we are hearing, I am hearing all the time. There is so much disagreement with the way things are done. A lot of people feel more can be done in educating young people. (Pepler, 1994, p. 6)

Findings and Implications

Advocates of site-based decision making have argued that one of its major benefits is improved student performance. However, many believe establishing a relationship between SBDM and student performance is problematic (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998; Whittey & Power, 1997; Malen & Ogawa, 1990). Systematic reviews of the literature by these authors revealed that most schools maintained previous levels of

performance with SBDM neither helping nor hindering those results. The researchers also noted that studies indicating otherwise failed to account for rival explanations or establish a causal link between achievement gains and the introduction of site-based decision making.

A second premise of site-based decision making is that decision making authority will be distributed to teachers and parents, as well as principals. Proponents believe that altering such influence relationships will make schools more successful with their clients, more responsive to their constituencies, and more deserving of public support (Malen et al., 1990). The three levels of influence change most often sought are the policymaking influence of site councils, principal-teacher influence relationships and professional-patron relationships.

Despite those intentions, Malen et al.'s (1990) review of the literature indicated that influence relationships remained largely unaffected. Rather than affecting change, they reported that shared decision making served to maintain existing influence relationships. For while it did open lines of communication and create opportunities for teachers and parents to be involved in policymaking, Malen et al. (p. 305) believed those individuals tended to operate as "ancillary advisors or pro forma endorsers than major policymakers or primary policy actors."

Brown (1990) found similar results in his study of decentralization in school districts in Alberta and British Columbia. He reported that site-based decision making was an example of organizational rather than political or economic decentralization. Parents and staffs had increased input into decision making but the principals remained most influential in their schools. Malen et al. (1990) believed this occurred because principals were inclined to protect their managerial prerogatives. They did this by controlling agendas, meeting format and information flow, in essence, controlling the processes and outcomes of decision making. Teachers, also protective of their professional autonomy, were seen as collaborating with principals to lessen the likelihood of sharing power with parents or other non-professionals.

Proponents of site-based decision making have noted that positive changes are

unlikely to occur if those responsible for carrying it out (teachers) or those whose children would be most affected by the changes (parents) are not involved (Brown, 1990; David, 1989; Fullan, 1991). Despite efforts to address those concerns, Levine and Eubanks (1992) noted that research on the effectiveness of site-based decision making has been more neutral and disappointing than positive and encouraging. A recent study reported that school councils in Ontario did not add value to the empowerment of parents, the technical work of schools, or the development of students (Leithwood et al., 1998). In terms of effectiveness, evidence from that study suggested that, at best, the influence of councils on school and classroom practices is likely to be little more than mildly positive.

Mauriel and Lindquist (cited in Levine & Eubanks, 1992), reflecting upon the lack of change in restructuring efforts, noted that unless substantial changes were made in the ways schools were operated and structured, SBDM will be “just another moderately helpful public relations/communications vehicle tinkering with the peripheral issues of school governance and management” (p. 67). However, Purkey (1991) believed that restructuring only creates spaces for staffs to address concerns associated with restructuring; it is the changes brought about following those discussions that determine the success of those efforts. For as Purkey noted, restructuring is “simply a tool that, used well, can help bring about improvement but used poorly is likely to have little or even a negative effect” (p. 377).

Forms and Effectiveness

According to Gamage, Sipple and Partridge (1996), not enough research has been done to prove the effectiveness of extending decision making to the local school level. Roberts and Dungan (1994) noted significant questions remained unanswered relative to how shared decision making happens in schools. Of those, Roberts and Dungan identified patterns of organization, communication and procedure as being the most critical.

Murphy and Beck (1995) suggested devolution of decision making authority

usually takes one of three forms: administrative control (principal decides), professional control (teachers decide) and community control (parent/community decide). Much less in evidence was a fourth type that they classified as balanced control in which power was exercised equally by school professionals and parent/community members.

Leithwood and Menzies (1998) examined 83 empirical studies of school-based management and classified them according to Murphy and Beck's (1995) forms of decision making authority. While they identified limitations to their study, Leithwood and Menzies (1998) suggested a number of variables affected the devolution of the decision making process. They included a school district's historical ways of doing business, the nature of student populations, community perceptions of the effectiveness of schools, and superintendents' visions. They also noted that these forms of decision making, while specifically aimed at allowing greater parental involvement, often led to little change in traditional parental roles in schools.

The Chicago Public Schools Project. A major study that provided initial insight into how decision making occurred at the local school level was the Chicago Public Schools Project, a five-year study of reform. Under the 1988 Chicago Reform Act, Local School Councils (LSCs) were to become the primary site of school governance in the Chicago Public School System. One of the main findings of the first year of implementation was that considerable disagreement existed regarding what shared decision making should look like. Easton et al. (1993) identified four distinct approaches to shared decision making in the fourteen councils they studied. They described those approaches as *limited*, *moderate*, *balanced* and *excessive governance*.

Limited governance councils (2 of 14 councils) were characterized by very brief meetings with poor parent and community attendance. Principals clearly dominated those councils, with proceedings tending to be largely superficial. Principals and/or teachers typically presented ideas to council that other members quickly and routinely approved. Parent and community members, while stating a trust for the professional members of council, often felt they were not getting complete information in order to make their own decisions. Because of this, parent and community members often felt

obligated to routinely follow the professionals' advice. Limited-governance councils were seen as providing very little leadership for their schools and remained "a largely unused resource" (Easton et al., 1993, p. 1).

Moderate-governance (7 of 14 councils) took relatively inactive roles in the leadership of their schools unless confronted by crisis situations (at which times they were able to exert tremendous influence). Except the chairpersons, parent representatives were largely uninvolved in decision making, speaking infrequently and making few motions. Principals tended to present information, make proposals and take charge of subsequent discussions. Very cordial relationships existed between council members, with lay members stating a trust for school professionals. Meetings were typically run efficiently with many topics discussed and decisions reached. The researchers believed moderate governance typified school councils in Chicago.

Excessive governance councils (2 of 14 councils) tended to be very active in the leadership of their schools. Their chairpersons dominated council proceedings, and in doing so, often encouraged more parent and community involvement. However, long-term antagonistic relationships existed between council members and principals, with both parties stating a distrust for the other. Members frequently complained they did not have enough information to make informed decisions. Meetings tended to be long and frequent with many protracted discussions and much unfinished business. Discussions were also marred by angry outbursts and partisan politics. The researchers believed excessive-governance to be a counterproductive approach to governance and its intended outcomes.

Deemed by the researchers to be the most effective form of decision making, 3 of the 14 councils displayed a balanced approach to governance. True leaders in their schools, these councils frequently took active stands on community issues. The principals and chairpersons shared the leadership role, with community and parent representatives playing equally vital roles. Relationships between council members were described as amicable, with members trusting one another and freely exchanging information. Important issues were dealt with indepth before decisions were made.

Balanced-governance councils, unlike any of the other governing councils, devised accountability mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of their decisions. The researchers believed that balanced-governance councils most closely represented the ideal being sought in the Chicago Public Schools Reform initiative.

The Role of the Principal in Implementing Change

The Process of Change

Change, according to Sergiovanni (1991), implies more than just adoption or implementation; it requires that the intended change be sustained over time and institutionalized so that new patterns of behaviour can emerge. While the literature often portrays the process of change as a complexity of bewilderment and anxiety, it also describes obstacles and strategies for overcoming the inherent difficulties associated with change. According to Louis and Miles (1990), obstacles to change vary in intensity and difficulty and can be categorized according to those that deal with the process of change (easiest), the people involved, and the organizational setting (hardest).

Efforts at enacting significant structural change have not always met with a great deal of success (Cuban, 1990; Deal, 1990; Fullan, 1991; Sarason, 1990). This is especially important to note given the increased emphasis upon restructuring at the local school site. Referred to as the “challenge of the 1990s” (Fullan, 1991) and the “second wave of reform” (Lieberman, 1988), such efforts are in contrast to the majority of past change efforts. Those efforts, while largely successful, tended to focus upon the alteration of specific day-to-day practices (Cuban, 1988; Sarason, 1990).

Heckman (1990) characterized the more recent changes as similar to the task of remodeling a house, with the emphasis upon rebuilding through the infiltration of fresh ideas. Deal (1990), meanwhile, referred to such change efforts as the “reweaving or reshaping of symbolic tapestry” and the “renegotiation of cherished myths and sacred rituals” (p. 9). According to Deal, the rigidity of school culture makes changes of this level difficult because it threatens the stability, predictability and comfort of existing culture. However, as Sergiovanni (1984) noted, culture is a constructed reality and

leaders play an important role in defining and sustaining that reality.

The Principal's Role

Managing school change and improvement is one of the most complex tasks of school leadership (Fullan, 1993; Louis & Miles, 1990). Hall and Hord (1987), reflecting upon their years of research and experience, concluded “regardless of what they did, [principals] directly affected the process of change and improvement in their schools” (p.2). Leithwood and Menzies (1997) suggested that principals have an especially crucial role to play in determining what the consequences of SBDM will be. They believed that principals, because of their power, have the ability to undermine or thwart the redistribution of power in their schools.

While much of the research on restructuring emphasized the importance of the principal in implementing change, it also indicated that many principals do not actively seek opportunities for change. Leithwood and Montgomery (1986) estimated the number of principals not actively seeking change to be approximately 90 percent. With the advent of SBDM and the increased expectation for change, Fullan and Miles (1992) argued that principals must learn to accept the change process as a positive experience to be understood and embraced, rather than a negative experience to be feared or avoided. They also cautioned that principals must learn to overcome barriers and cope with the chaos that naturally exists during the complex process of change.

Gamage (1993a) noted that principals were often frustrated by role ambiguities, peer tensions, the increased demand on their time and energy, and by the need to assume responsibilities outside their experience. Fullan (1991) believed that implementing change is often difficult for principals because they usually do not receive help from their central administration in ways of dealing with change, especially those that deal with changes in their role. He believed this often created feelings of inadequacy and incompetence in principals, feelings they most often expressed in private. Sarason (1971) suggested this reflected the principal escaping from one kind of role loneliness (as a teacher) to another (as a school administrator).

According to Fullan (1991), few things could be more uncomfortable or more undermining of a principal's confidence than being expected by his or her superiors to lead the implementation of a change that (a) they do not understand, (b) that subordinates may not be interested in, or (c) in which they are interested in but do not know what resources and assistance are available. Fullan noted these insecurities are the reasons many principals are reluctant to share their personal concerns and inadequacies about change with their teachers. This reluctance was seen as reflective of the history of professional relationships in education, with teachers and principals most concerned with keeping distances while respecting each other's professional autonomy.

Brown and Hunter (1998) noted tradition, vested interests and trust were among issues facing principals involved in restructuring efforts. They believed most researchers of school administration tended to overlook the effect of micropolitics when studying changes to the ways in which principals, teachers and parents interact in the new political arena. Micropolitics has been described as the use of formal and informal power by individuals and groups to achieve their goals in organizations (Blase, 1991). Brown and Hunter (1998) believed that while parents were important players in micropolitics, teachers were the major participants.

Blase and Blase (1996) suggested principals who were willing to share power with teachers, demonstrate trust and encouragement, and provide support and a caring attitude were most likely to benefit from teacher empowerment. However, Johnson (1990) cautioned that teacher empowerment can be problematic for principals because it typically does not address how and to whom teachers will be responsible. For as she noted, "if there is no assurance that teachers will exercise their newly-acquired power on behalf of children and parents rather than on behalf of their own comfort and well-being, many will be reluctant to endorse teacher empowerment" (p. 344).

Issues Pertaining to Parental Involvement in Education

Defining Involvement

Parental involvement has been identified as a key component of effective schools

(Purkey & Smith, 1983; Holt & Murphy, 1993). Henderson's (1988) survey of studies conducted during the 1980s reported that parental involvement in almost any form appeared to produce measurable gains in student achievement. And while some would question the latter (e.g., Malen et al., 1990; Leithwood, 1998), there is little agreement about what constitutes parental involvement in schools. According to Reeve (1993), the terms involvement and participation are used broadly and interchangeably to denote a wide range of activities. The exception is the Australian context, where parent *involvement* is defined as "voluntary labour" in support of schools, and parent *participation* as activities that give parents a direct role in educational decision-making.

Epstein (1987) identified models of school and family connectedness that consisted of five levels of parental involvement. They included basic obligations (providing school supplies, a place for school work), school-to-home communications (informing parents about the school and their child's achievement), parental involvement at school (e.g., assisting with class trips, attending assemblies), parental involvement in learning activities at home, and parental involvement in governance and advocacy. According to Epstein (1991), most schools embrace a sense of partnership with parents, but few have translated their beliefs into plans or their plans into actions. She believed that in order for that to happen, governments must provide both financial and technical support to foster meaningful involvement.

Storey (1989), reflecting upon the Canadian education system, believed participation and involvement were two different terms. He believed participation denoted a sense of partnership where parents were seen as partners in the work and decisions of the school. Parents shared-interest in and responsibility for the welfare of its students provided the basis for that partnership. He defined involvement as the actual process of drawing parents into a partnership with the school. Storey believed the result of participation through involvement was a mutually strengthening relationship that valued and accepted shared responsibility for schooling. Despite the term chosen, the latter definition, with its focus upon shared responsibility for decision-making, is the focus of this study.

Realignment of Power and Influence

Embedded in the notion of school decentralization is a realignment of power and influence between professional educators and other members of the educational community. Mintzberg (1979) defined decentralization as the extent to which power is disbursed among many individuals. Brown (1990) extended that thinking and defined decentralization as the extent to which authority to make decisions is distributed among the roles in an organization.

According to Swanson (1993), the issue of decentralization is not solely a matter of state power, teacher power or people power, but the achievement of the best balance among legitimate interests. Murphy (1992) also noted such a relationship, stating "the traditional dominant relationship—with professional educators on the playing field and parents on the sidelines acting as cheerleaders or agitators, or more likely passively watching the action, is replaced by a more equal distribution of influence" (p. 101). The notion of principals as "lords of an educational fiefdom" (Holt & Murphy, 1993, p. 177) is replaced by a new democratic coalition of interest groups responsible for administering and managing a school.

However, not all would agree that such changes in structure produce similar changes in practice. Goldring (1993) noted the legitimacy and quantity of parental involvement in schools have increased because of recent educational reforms. However, she noted the hierarchal governing structure continues to exist in most systems, with principals acting as middle managers or "boundary spanners" (p. 95). According to Goldring, principals play a key role in determining the amount, as well as effectiveness, of parental participation.

Sallis (1988) noted that many principals fear parental participation in school affairs. This she says is because many principals know only two types of parents, both of which are deemed to be equally troublesome: parents who care almost too much and would like to run the school, and those who appear not to care at all. Sallis suggested that more be done to encourage the majority of parents who tend to be "well-disposed, bewildered about the part they can play, a little frightened of schools, and fairly busy

doing other things" (p. 160).

Many researchers studying lay influence in Great Britain have noted that parents were often reluctant to utilize the power allocated to them in their decision-making roles, a finding that may be important to this study. Kogan (1984) reported British lay governors often found many aspects of educational practice difficult to understand, tending to concentrate on educational product rather than process. Golby and Brigley (1989) reported lay governors reluctant to interfere in matters that they deemed to be "professional" in nature.

Munn (1998) found similar evidence, noting that British governors believed their main role to be support for the school and its teachers while accepting the policies put forward by the head teachers (principals). Some governing bodies discussed and debated issues more than others, but Munn found no evidence that they were actively involved either in initiating policy at the school level or challenging policy formulations presented by head teachers. She suggested governing bodies tended to "react to policy initiatives taken elsewhere and to be guided by the head teacher's interpretation of the salience of the policy issue for the school" (p. 388).

Chapman (1988) also found this reluctance among participants in her study, noting a lack of expertise among some parents contributed to their feeling of being overwhelmed by "the expert knowledge" of professional educators. Field (1993) believed many governors saw their role primarily as an overseeing one, despite being aware of their decision-making powers and responsibilities. As Field commented, "It does not want to be an initiating body: it does not wish to interfere in 'educational' matters; it has no desire to exercise its powers to the full" (p. 167).

Goodlad (1984) noted a similar thrust in North American education. He believed most parents would prefer to have more power shifted to the local site but do not want the accountability or responsibility that accompanies such decision making, a statement that appears to conflict with the goals of decentralization. However, Goodlad believed most parents would be satisfied with the balance of power shifting to professionals at the local school site as it would increase their likelihood of influencing events.

Vincent (1996), in reflecting upon parents' reluctance to become involved in schools, noted that parents, from all class and ethnic groups, are often intimidated by schools. She believed this was because they often do not know their way around schools, have not met the individuals they have come to see, may have been reminded of their own dislike of school, and often do not know what questions to ask. Vincent felt teachers, in their conversations with parents, sometimes assumed knowledge and information that parents did not have, furthering frustrating and alienating parents from being more involved in the decision making process.

Issues Concerning School Councils

Defining Roles and Responsibilities

In a study conducted in Alberta, Johnson (1993) determined that school councils saw their chief roles as providing a communication link between parents and their schools, fundraising, acting as a sounding board for school officials and the Board, and helping with special functions. School council chairs expected their level of influence to increase in the future, given the province's support for increased parental involvement in decision making.

According to Johnson (1993), many principals and district office administrators in the province were concerned that school councils had the potential to misjudge their role in the new decision making arena and, by doing so, substantially alter the current balance of decision making power. However, Johnson's study found that school council members did not share these desires, wanting increased input into decision making, but not wanting to be the actual decision makers.

Miller (1995) found similar roles and expectations existed for school councils in Alberta. He noted communication was a critical component of effective school council operation, the need for local input when determining roles and responsibilities for school councils, and that school council members wanted to play a meaningful role in their schools. However, Miller's findings also indicated that problems surrounded school council implementation. He identified those problems as securing adequate membership,

the need for present authorities to be willing to share power, and special interest groups negatively influencing school council implementation.

In a study I conducted for Alberta Education in the early months of 1995, more than 1000 responses to the government's position paper on the roles and responsibilities of school councils were collected and analyzed. My findings indicated that professionals (educators) and nonprofessional (parents) overwhelmingly supported an advisory role for school councils. Also noted were that professionals were most concerned with special interest groups, the erosion of professionalism, and parents' lack of expertise to be involved in the decision making process. Nonprofessionals were most concerned with special interest groups, lack of expertise, time commitments, responsibility and liability (Pepler, 1995).

The three key recommendations arising from the position paper study were to allow school councils to develop their own membership, election and meeting procedures; provide school councils with information on funding and inservice opportunities; and, to promote a continuum of roles and responsibilities for school councils, based upon the needs and interests of the local school community. That continuum was proposed to include both decision making and advisory roles. Those changes were included in the School Amendment Act, 1995.

Problems in Implementation

Gamage's (1993b) study of school councils in New South Wales indicated that many factors hindered the formation and subsequent decision making effectiveness of councils. Among those reported by Gamage were the following: fear of lost power by principals and existing parent associations in the school; role conflict between school councils and existing parent associations; uncertainty about the powers, responsibilities and role of the school council, itself; lack of direction among council members; the feeling of being a rubber stamp for the school administration; parent and teacher apathy; and, principals' reluctance to share relevant and meaningful information. However, despite these concerns, 88 percent of the school council members interviewed by Gamage

reported being enthusiastic and keen to devote their time to such councils despite the ambiguities and frustrations they felt with membership on these advisory bodies.

Yanitski (1997) studied the perceptions of Alberta principals, teachers and school council chairpersons regarding the roles they played in decision making. He determined that many factors affected that process including leadership style, pluralism and power, trust, morals and ethics. Recommendations emerging from that study included the following: (a) streamlining the decision making process to allow participants the opportunity to be involved where commitment, expertise and desire existed; (b) clarifying school and district policies regarding authority and responsibility for making final decisions; and (c) ensuring that school councils remain advisory and do not become involved in issues of governance that were currently the domain of school boards.

In a study involving Ontario school councils, Walsh (1995) determined that different shareholders in education have varying ideas about how parents should be involved in education—either as advisors, assistants or decision makers. That ambiguity was seen as making school council implementation difficult. She also noted that the hierarchical structure of the educational institution often prevented the sharing of decision making power with parents. Unless the structure of the educational system was radically changed, Walsh believed true parental involvement in educational decision making was unlikely to occur.

Non-Involvement of Culturally Distinct Parents

Laureau (1989) suggested a lack of “interconnectedness” explained why working class parents in Britain were less involved in local decision making than their middle class counterparts. She believed middle class parents and teachers tended to speak about education in the same language and have similar expectations of the education system. Working class parents, however, unable to bridge that cultural gap, were more likely to remain dissociated from the school and its teachers.

Blackledge (1995), in a comparison of British and Chicago school councils, identified valuing the cultural and linguistic backgrounds of parents as critical to

achieving the goals of increased parental involvement in decision making, especially for minority or poor parents. He noted that before the Chicago reform, minority or poor parents were rarely seen in the schools, academic standards were below national levels, attendance rates were poor and the minority culture community felt alienated by the majority culture.

Blackledge (1995) noted that teachers initially resisted supporting increased parental involvement because they assumed little of educational value occurred in those homes and that minority or poor parents had little to offer to professionals. Teachers, however, also acknowledged they knew little of the literacy or other learning practices that were going on in the households of those parents. With time, some schools came to value the minority parents' language and culture. As a result, there was no longer "a gulf between the culture of the home and the culture of the school" (Blackledge, 1995, p. 315) and parents became more involved in their children's education.

Conversely, in Britain, where legislation "failed to narrow the gulf between majority culture institutions and minority culture families, the potential for working class and minority parents remained unfilled and the promise of parent empowerment remained a pretense" (Blackledge, 1995, p. 317). For as Blackledge contended, "empowerment for some is not empowerment at all" (p. 318).

Critique

Site-based decision making, of which school councils and parental involvement are key components, is intended to alter organizational structures, power bases and professional relationships. Intended to change are the ways in which parents, teachers and principals influence the decision making process and relate to one another. The literature, however, fails to find evidence of those changes occurring.

A number of reasons for the lack of changes have been suggested, including the entrenched hierarchical nature of schools and the reluctance or inability of principals to extend decision making power to parents and/or teachers. The literature specific to school councils suggests parent and teacher apathy, uncertainty about the role, power and

responsibilities of school councils, and the lack of relevant and meaningful information shared with council members, as reasons for the lack of change.

Barott and Raybould (1998) believed that before we can speak of organizational change, we need to be clear about how we speak about organizations. They supported Bacharach and Lawler's (1980) definition that organizations are patterned processes of interactions between people and that organizational structure is a crystallization of those processes. Barott and Raybould (1998) also believed that to understand organizational change or persistence of that change one must study relationship patterns, rules and assumptions. And while the literature on restructuring is filled with descriptions of the intended contributions of school councils and their shortcomings, it has generally not addressed these issues.

Barott and Raybould (1998) noted changing the current pattern of relationships in schools "is fundamentally a demand that we change schools from what they are into something that they are *not*" (p. 31). Such movement, however, creates the potential for very real and legitimate conflict because people's intentions and goals often differ (Pfeffer, 1981). And, because conflict is not generally addressed in the literature on school councils, this study attempts to address that shortfall by focusing upon the processes of relating, the assumptions on which they are based, and their inevitable conflict.

I have taken this approach because I believe that school councils are not "nouns or things" (Weick, 1969) or something "that one can remold as if it were a piece of clay or redesigned as though it were a machine" (Barott & Raybould, 1998, p. 28). They are organizational processes, and to understand change requires understanding the nature of the relationships and the patterns of relating that occur in organizations. For as Barott and Raybould (1998) noted,

By acknowledging the difficulties in collaborative relationships, we have the opportunity to use our differences as strengths and not waste our time and energy on hopeless solutions to unresolvable difficulties. In this way, we open up the opportunity to devote more of our attention to the education of children. (p. 40)

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

This chapter contains a description of the specific procedures followed in this study. It includes discussions on the following: (a) philosophical assumptions, (b) research design, (c) selection of participants, (d) data collection procedures, (e) data analysis procedures, (e) procedures used to ensure methodological rigor (trustworthiness and authenticity) and, (e) ethical considerations.

Philosophical Assumptions

Based upon the nature of the questions I asked in this study and the ways in which those questions were researched, I made certain philosophical assumptions about human nature and society (ontological assumptions) and the nature of research (epistemological assumptions). For as Rothe (1993, p. 18) noted,

As researchers, we live and act in a world that is meaningful. It has order, harmony, character and continuity. Based upon this premise, we link our empirical activities and experiences to larger interpretive schemes such as culture, values, gender or religion. These schemes become the basis upon which we construct knowledge and make sense of reality. Pretending that such schemes do not exist, and that we can put our points of view aside, means that we ignore an important factor in the research process.

Ontological Assumptions

Traditional research is based upon the premise that there is a single, objective reality to our world, a reality that can be observed, known and measured. A growing number of researchers, however, contend that multiple realities exist; that reality is a highly subjective phenomenon in need of interpreting not measuring. The interpretive paradigm or world view, which is one of many perspectives on the nature of social science, advocates a multi-pluristic, ever-changing view of reality. According to Eisenhart (1988, p. 103), reality exists “only by social agreement or consensus among participants in a [given] context.”

Guba and Lincoln (1989) provided additional insight into the question of the

nature of reality and what can be known about it. Advocating a relativist view that knowledge and truth are created not discovered by the mind, they suggested there is no unique, real world that pre-exists and is independent of human mental activity or language. According to Guba and Lincoln (1989), knowledge is neither found nor discovered but constructed and those constructions are created realities that “do not exist outside of the persons who create and hold them; they are not part of some “objective” world that exists apart from their constructors” (p. 143).

Supporting this ontological world view, I believe there are often multiple or conflicting constructions which hold the potential to be meaningful. I use the term meaningful, as opposed to true, because that tends to imply a “real” world of knowable and irrefutable facts. Schwandt (1994) contended that all constructions, whether conflicting or joint constructions shared by the inquirer and the study’s participants, can be evaluated according to their fit with the data and the information it encompasses. Goodman & Elgin (1988) believed they could also be evaluated for their rightness. They defined rightness as the act of fitting and working but “not a fitting *onto*—a correspondence or matching or mirroring of independent Reality—but a fitting *into* a context or discourse or standing complex of other symbols” (p. 158).

Epistemological Assumptions

Concerned with the origin, nature and limits of human knowledge, epistemology addresses the nature of the relationship between the knower (respondent) and would be knower (inquirer). Epistemological assumptions affect the ways in which individuals approach and conduct their research. Epistemological assumptions are also constrained by an inquirer’s ontological views.

Because I believe that knowledge is socially constructed, bound by time and place and influenced by the environment and subjective experiences of the individual, I also contend that knowledge is transactional and subjective. By this I mean that as a researcher, I am interactively linked to the respondents in the study, not as an independent entity but interactive and capable of influencing (or being influenced by) the other. Guba

and Lincoln (1994, p. 110) described this relationship as one that is “inextricably intertwined.”

I believe there is no duality between myself as researcher and the study’s respondents. This means that my values have inevitably entered the inquiry and must be addressed. For as Guba and Lincoln (1989) noted, “Inquirers are human, and cannot escape their humanness. That is, they cannot by an act of will set aside their own subjectivity, nor can they stand outside the arena of humanness created by other persons involved” (p. 88). These philosophical understandings and their implications were important for me when choosing the research design for this study.

Research Design

A rigorous research design with the intent of searching for laws and underlying regularities to the social world was not appropriate for this study given my underlying assumptions about the nature of knowledge. Instead, I sought a more loosely structured and inductive approach. Qualitative methods, with their focus upon narrative and the ways in which people make sense of their lives, was the research design that I believed best enabled me to explore those understandings. The study followed Bodgan and Biklen’s (1982) description of a “multi-site” study in that it investigated a number of individual respondents in different locations. These sites and respondents were chosen to provide a “snapshot” of how school council members understood their involvement on particular school councils.

Selection of Participants

When choosing between possible sites and participants for the study, I focused upon three criteria: access, suitability and acceptability. Access refers to ease of entry into the site; suitability to how well the site contains the rich mix of processes, people and interactions that are crucial to understanding the research question; and, acceptability, to how comfortable I would feel as a researcher in that particular setting and how likely the participants would accept me in that role.

With these criteria in mind, I chose Kettle Creek School District, a rural school jurisdiction that was not only well known to me, but where many of the jurisdiction's professional staff knew me as an educator and a researcher. I was also aware of the divergent nature of the schools and the communities in that particular school district. This familiarity and prior knowledge proved important for me as a researcher as it established credibility and easy access.

Including all the district's school councils in this study was not possible or desirable. Because of this, I chose to do a reputational-case selection, where recommendations were made by an expert in the area. The expert used to recommend sites was the district's superintendent, who also agreed to be a part of the study. The superintendent supplied the names of schools that he felt were actively pursuing increased parental decision making through their school councils. Using his recommendations, I chose Daviston Composite and Willow Ridge schools as potential sites for my study. I chose them because of their diverse populations, my familiarity with their principals, and the fact that I had not worked or lived in either of those communities during my tenure with the school district.

I contacted the principals of the two schools and explained the nature and purpose of my study. I indicated to them that I was interested in interviewing principals, school council chairs, and parent representatives from the two councils. Both principals expressed an interest in the study and agreed to discuss it with their respective chairs. Following those discussions, I received word from the principals that they and their chairs were interested in participating in the study. They also indicated that the remaining members of the two councils had been informed of the study and were invited to participate in it.

I relied upon volunteering, and a form of purposive sampling called network selection (Patton, 1980), where successive participants were named by preceding participants, to enlist parent representatives for the study. Gall, Borg and Gall (1996, p. 218) described purposive sampling as a means to achieve indepth understanding of selected individuals rather than accurately represent a defined population. I chose this

method because of my unfamiliarity with the majority of school council members. As it was, most parent representatives on the two councils were unknown to me, other than the two teachers who sat on the Daviston council as teacher or parent representatives.

Unfortunately, few parent representatives expressed an interest in being a part of the study. Of the remaining 16 parent representatives on the two councils, only two parents from the Daviston council (both teachers) expressed interest. No parent volunteers from Willow Ridge, other than the two co-chairs, volunteered to participate in the study. One other participant, a non-teaching council member from Daviston, was later identified by another participant as interested in the study.

However, as indicated earlier, that may not have been as serious a limitation as originally thought. For as my later analysis indicated, most of the members who sat on their respective councils shared similar backgrounds and views of education. Interviewing more members might not have yielded the rich mix of processes, people and interactions that I initially thought would be represented on the councils. For, as I later discovered, the rich diversity of people comprising the two communities had not yet found a way to be represented on their respective school councils.

Data Gathering

In keeping with the philosophy of interpretive inquiry and the design of this study, I used semi-structured interviews to gather data for this study. As noted by Kahn and Cannell (cited in Marshall & Rossman, 1989, p. 43), interviewing is often described as a “conversation with a purpose.” The intent of the interviews was to allow me to “get close, physically and psychologically” (Patton, 1980, p. 43) to the phenomenon under study. For as Patton noted,

We interview people to find out from them things we cannot directly observe . . . We cannot observe behaviors that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world—we have to ask people questions about those things. The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person’s perspective.

Gall et al. (1996) noted that the main advantage of the interview process is that the interviewer can build trust and rapport with the respondents. They felt this made it possible to obtain data that might not have been revealed by any other data collection method. I believed this was true of my interview process, however, I was not entirely convinced that all respondents felt comfortable in sharing their feelings or insights on certain issues, especially as it related to concerns about increased parental involvement in decision making. Bradburn's notion (quoted in Fontana & Frey, 1994) of "socially desirable responses" provided insight into this aspect of respondent behavior.

In particular, I sensed that the principals were somewhat reluctant to share their concerns about parents (other than teachers as parents) having an increased role in the decision making process. Reflecting upon the principals' words, I wondered whether they felt it was inappropriate to discuss possible concerns or shortcomings, given the district's active support and promotion for the concept. However, I also wondered whether these principals were simply unlike their colleagues who responded to the government of Alberta's position paper on the roles and responsibilities of school councils. For those individuals appeared to have many more concerns about increased parental responsibility in decision making. Either way, I believed it was an important consideration for me when discussing the contextual framework and findings of the study.

In each interview, I used a combination of set questions and probes derived from the literature, my prior experiences with school councils, and my work with the position paper on the roles and responsibilities of school councils. All interviews included the same questions but the order and focus of subsequent questions changed as I tried to follow the lead of the participants. Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggested this was an important consideration because they believed it was impossible to pursue someone else's emic constructions with a set of predetermined questions based solely on the inquirer's etic constructions.

The interviews were audio recorded on standard cassette tapes. Gall et al. (1996) indicated that audio recording is convenient, inexpensive and makes the retention of

actual wording possible. However, as I discovered, technology also has its downside. A tape-recorder malfunction occurred during one interview and was unknown to either the respondent or me until I returned to Edmonton.

Fortunately, I also kept a researcher's journal in which I recorded my thoughts and insights immediately following each interview. The focus of the journal, as noted by Bogdan and Biklen (1982, p. 74), was to maintain "a written account of what the researcher hears, sees, experiences and thinks in collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study." This journal became invaluable to me, not only because it provided a summarized version of the conversation that was partially lost due to the tape-recorder malfunction, but because it greatly aided the analysis process. Following the interviews, another individual transcribed the tapes. She was advised of the need to respect confidentiality of the information and its source.

Data Analysis

Gall et al. (1996) noted that data analysis is a systematic process of arranging the interview transcripts to bring understanding to the data and to inform others of these discoveries. According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982, p. 146), this analysis involves organizing the data, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and to be learned, and what is important to tell others. I began searching for patterns by doing a careful reading of the nine transcripts and highlighting key words and phrases that addressed the study's main questions. I also used my researcher's journal to identify portions of the interviews that I felt might be meaningful in the analysis process.

Following this initial analysis, I added one or two word descriptions or codes to sentences and paragraphs in each transcript. I did this to identify common threads that might be winding their way throughout the interviews. Continual re-reading and identification of these descriptions yielded several codes that I later began grouping into common categories. Further analysis of the categories yielded one theme that I felt was intertwined throughout the respondents' stories.

Having identified the study's categories and themes, I then began the task of pulling it together for the reader. My intent was to find a way in which to tell the respondents' stories, both common and unique. In doing so, I wanted to include as many quotations as possible, for I felt this would most accurately relate the respondents' stories. Other than changing names and locations, or using pseudonyms, quotations were left intact. Any changes that were made were done to ensure the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents.

Trustworthiness and Authenticity

Trustworthiness and authenticity are two criteria that have been advanced to judge the adequacy of interpretive studies (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Trustworthiness refers to the likelihood that a study's reported interpretations have credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Guba & Lincoln, 1988). Authenticity refers to fairness. Those criteria and the methods I used to ensure each are included in the following paragraphs.

Trustworthiness

Credibility. Guba and Lincoln (1988, p. 84) identified credibility as "the degree to which data and interpretations of the investigator are similar to the multiple realities in the minds of the informants." Guba and Lincoln (1989) suggested prolonged engagement, persistent observation, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, progressive subjectivity (monitoring the inquirer's own developing constructions) and member checks as techniques to address credibility.

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) described the important elements of time as that spent at the research site, interviewing and building sound relationships with respondents. Due to my own health and the travel involved in going to the site, time was in limited supply in this study. As a result, neither prolonged engagement nor persistent observation occurred. However, I believe my knowledge of the district and the two communities helped overcome the potential for misinformation, distortion, or presented "fronts" (Guba

& Lincoln, 1986). Because I already knew the school district, the superintendent, both principals in the study, and the school council members who were teachers, I did not feel pressured to spend a great deal of time at the two sites. When there, however, I did provide each respondent with extensive periods of time in which to conduct their interviews. This appeared to be an important consideration, for three of the respondents exceeded my original estimation of 90 minutes for each interview session. My familiarity also helped me understand the context's culture and establish the rapport and trust necessary to understand the respondents' constructions.

Peer debriefing was a means I used to "test out" my study's findings and tentative analyses. Having individuals who were not involved in the study but were able to ask me insightful questions as the study progressed helped me to better understand my own values and their role in the study. This was most helpful in the design and analysis stages. Member checks also provided a means to assess the study's trustworthiness. To ensure credibility, I returned each participants' transcript to them and asked them to verify its accuracy according to actual and intended messages. I also provided opportunities for the respondents to redress or elaborate on any aspect of their transcript.

Several participants were asked to provide opinions on the categories and theme that I saw emerging from the study. In doing so, I was attempting to find out if the respondents believed my interpretations of their stories were acceptable and credible. Their responses were positive and confirming of my original analysis. Guba and Lincoln (1989, p. 239) stressed this form of credibility is the most important aspect of trustworthiness if the evaluator wants to establish that the multiple realities presented were those from whom the original constructions were collected.

Negative case analysis, while not explored in great detail, did provide an opportunity for me to evaluate the "fit" of my study's findings. I was most interested in seeing that my analyses accounted for most, if not all, of the personal constructions presented to me. Progressive subjectivity, ensuring that my own constructions were not privileged over those of anyone else, also aided me in assessing the study's fit. I did that by recording my own assumptions about the study prior to beginning it. As the study

progressed, I checked those assumptions against my emerging findings. Based on the fact that some of my earlier assumptions changed over the course of the study, I felt I had been successful in not privileging my own viewpoints over those of the respondents.

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) suggested continual alertness as another means to check one's biases and subjectivity. They suggested asking questions such as, "Who do I not see? With whom do I have a special relationship, and in what light would they interpret phenomena? What data collecting means have I not used that could provide additional insight?"

In Daviston, the "unseen" were the school council members who were parents but not members of the teaching profession. In Willow Ridge, they were the parents who were members but not chairs. Both these groups were noticeably absent from my study, despite my intentions to have their voices and stories included. Their silences reminded me of the importance of providing sufficient contextual details so others might make sense of that silence. It also served to remind me of the problems inherent in generalizing to particular populations, such as parents, without recognizing the variances that can occur within such a group.

Special relationships were a part of this study and I felt their acknowledgment was important. I had an extensive working relationship with the superintendent and two of the principals in the study. I also knew by name, however, not personally, two of the teachers involved in the study. The remainder of the participants, including the chairs, were unknown to me. When reflecting upon these personal relationships, I felt that including my preconceived notions about these individuals and their beliefs regarding parental involvement in decision making was important. I decided to keep those beliefs in a journal that I kept prior to and throughout the study.

Transferability. Within interpretivist studies, transferability is primarily the way in which the challenge of knowledge accumulation has been addressed (Greene, 1990). Guba and Lincoln (1988, pp. 20-21) defined transferability as "the extent to which the case study facilitates the drawing of inferences by the reader and may have applicability in his or her own context or situation." However, as Guba and Lincoln (1989) noted,

transferability is always relative, depends entirely on the degree to which salient conditions overlap or match, and separating relevant descriptors from irrelevant ones can be a difficult process.

Cronbach (1982), Lincoln and Guba (1985) and others have also suggested that the question of transferability does not rest with the researcher, but others who wish to replicate or use the findings in other settings. For as Greene (1990) noted, “interpretivist inquirers must provide for the possibility of transferability, but its actualization—in the form of scientific knowledge accumulation or enhanced practice—depends on the interests of potential users” (p. 237).

The descriptors I chose to aid in transferability were those most frequently cited in the literature. They included time, place, context and the culture from which the findings emerged. In doing so, I hoped to provide a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) that would enable others to assess the likelihood of transferability to their own situation or one they were interested in.

Dependability and Confirmability. Dependability refers to the stability of the data over time. Confirmability refers to the assurance that the data, interpretations, and outcomes of inquiries are rooted in the contexts and persons involved in the study and are not figments of the researcher’s mind (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Guba and Lincoln noted that interpretive research, unlike conventional research, recognizes that methodological changes or shifts in construction are natural, occur throughout the study and represent successful or maturing inquiry. As they suggested, I did a dependability and confirmability audit to help outsiders assess the degree to which this aspect of trustworthiness had been met.

My audit trail consisted of a notebook in which I recorded the source of my data, including time, place and methods used to gather that information. I also kept copies of my original codings for each transcript, the various versions of categories that emerged from those codings, and reasons why changes were made or contemplated. I followed the same procedures for the theme and sub-themes that emerged from those categories. These procedures were helpful, not only for the actual analysis process, but in providing

additional confidence that my findings met the criteria of trustworthiness.

The last question I pondered was that of additional forms of data collection that could have provided more insight into the study. Observing the two school councils in their regular monthly meetings was one method. However, an unanticipated change in one of the school council's schedule, and the fact that the other council was not meeting during the time I was available to them, made this means unavailable to me. If it had been, I believe it would have added an additional element of understanding to my data.

In effect, it may have helped me to understand how individual beliefs are played out in the reality of school council meetings. However, I could not be assured that my presence would not have altered the members' ways of acting or responding, thus confounding my previous understandings. I also felt videotaping the meetings might have produced the same concern. As it was, I had to be satisfied that the other means I used to address dependability and confirmability were sufficient to overcome questions related to my reliance on interviews as the primary method of data collection.

Authenticity

Trustworthiness is primarily concerned with methodological criteria. Authenticity differs in that it addresses whether or not respondents' constructions have been faithfully and fairly represented (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). To enhance authenticity, I tried to ensure that I gave voice to the different constructions presented in the study, even when they appeared to be in conflict. One example of this involved conflicting viewpoints regarding the positive or negative impact of teachers' involvement on the Daviston school council. I tried to provide a voice for all the respondents' constructions, however, I was aware that I was almost totally reliant on people's portrayal of events in order to make sense of those conflicting viewpoints.

Because of this, I tried to provide readers with a sense of the social structures that bound those people together. In doing so, I hoped that others would be able to assess the degree of plausibility and internal coherence of my constructions, thus addressing the question of authenticity. However, as cautious as I tried to be, I was also aware that

authenticity might never be fully confirmed. For as Lincoln and Denzin (1994) noted, “text is always a site of political struggle over the real and its meanings” (p. 580).

Ethical Considerations

Before embarking on this study, permission in writing was obtained from the Ethical Review Committee of the Department of Educational Policy Studies of the University of Alberta. Subsequently, informed consent was also obtained from the study’s participants. Each participant was apprised of their voluntary status, and as such, advised that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Furthermore, participants were advised that confidentiality would be protected in this and all data reporting by pseudonyms and the careful wording of quotations to conceal their identities.

CHAPTER 4

THE FINDINGS

The purpose of this chapter is to present the experiences and perspectives of the district superintendent and eight school council members from two schools in the Kettle Creek School District. It is anticipated that, through the sharing of such perspectives, a greater understanding of school council involvement will result.

In this section, participant responses collected during semi-structured interviews have been organized into a category and theme format. The four categories that reflect the experiences and perspectives of respondents are (a) laying the groundwork, (b) leading by example, (c) making it happen, and (d) emerging issues. The theme that concludes the chapter is entitled “relations.”

Throughout the chapter, data interpretation has been presented through direct quotation and paraphrasing. Quotations have been single spaced and edited to exclude irrelevant pauses or insignificant words. In all cases, care has been taken to ensure correspondence of meaning with the original text.

CATEGORIES

Laying the Groundwork

This section details the events and people that contributed to the introduction of school councils in the Kettle Creek School District. It begins with Neil, the district superintendent, sharing his story of its initial challenges and successes. It also describes the school board’s philosophical stance toward school councils and the concessions made by its members in order for school councils to be successful.

Superintendent Advocacy

In order for school councils to become a reality in the Kettle Creek School District, many criteria had to be met. The first, and perhaps most important, was for an advocate to promote its development and acceptance. In the Kettle Creek District, that

advocate was the district's superintendent, Neil. The following section details Neil's role in its introduction, his reasons for promoting the concept and methods for helping others understand it.

Taking Responsibility. Despite a lack of direction provided by the province, many individuals in the Kettle Creek School District were committed to the concept of school councils. Neil, the district superintendent, was one of its strongest proponents. He sensed school councils were going to be mandated in Alberta, given his reading of the province's political situation. Neil spoke about his premonition.

I had a very good inkling of where things were going just by listening at the political ground level, listening to where the department was, talking to our MLA, talking to the Ministers. And taking the '88 Act, knowing how poorly written the section on school councils was, and that if there was a philosophy, we knew that was going to be the focus.

We also knew that with the present minister, because of experience, probably suspected that school boards got in the way of education rather than helping it. He being a principal and then the ATA president, he's always seen school boards as blocks. He experienced it at that level. So it was a pretty clear guess that politically it was coming down, so we started preparing our folks [school trustees] about eight months before we started throwing it out to the people, before any draft regulations came out, before the new Act came out. The board was somewhat prepared so it wasn't a shock.

Neil believed "the time was right" for increased parental involvement in the district's schools. He felt the district's unique composition and its rich history of parental involvement supported such a move. Neil discussed those elements.

Our jurisdictions are built in pockets. Our pockets are not villages necessarily, but they are identifiable communities. There are only two larger communities so the smaller communities always had good school councils, well beforehand, whether we called them that or not. The principal went to the pub with the parents, or the coffee shops, or wherever else. And so that chat was going on. The staff was part of the community and *is* part of the community. There's an expectancy set in terms of parents and in terms of staff that makes it work.

Neil wondered, however, if too much was being made of the provincial controversy surrounding the introduction of school councils. He felt recent media

coverage was responsible for much of the current negativity. Neil believed his district had remained clear of that controversy. He spoke about that belief.

In fact, I think that a lot of our parents are saying, “What’s all this ballyhoo about? We’ve been chatting for a long time here. We have input.” Now our larger communities maybe not so much, but as in most social organizations, enthusiasm spreads and so our smaller schools are affecting our larger schools. And they’re saying, “Hey, this is a success. We have an opportunity here. This isn’t a problem.”

Neil shared a recent event that he believed illustrated a lack of concern at the local school level.

The media often is looking for controversy but there isn’t controversy here. People think it’s a good idea. When the whole ECS funding mess came up last year, school councils were involved in making recommendations for their schools, as to how best to make it happen with the reduced funding. And it was just a wonderful vehicle. Our parents are involved. Parental involvement is a policy. This is what we accept in our schools. These are our standards. This is what is really important to us. It encourages our parents to be partners in the whole organization so that bottom line, our kids can achieve well.

Preparing Others. As the chief advocate for school councils, Neil took the initiative to organize a series of workshops to help district stakeholders understand their new roles and responsibilities. Neil talked about the first workshop and its focus.

The first workshop we had was about definition because I really believe people had to define what they considered a school council to be. So in concert with the board, and I’ll be quite up front here, I said, “We’ve got to figure out what we want so we’re going to ask for forgiveness rather than permission.” So pro-actively, we got into the sucker. And the first thing we did was have people decide what a council is and also who does what in that system.

Neil continued, noting his frustrations with the province’s lack of direction.

The province is so slow and so cumbersome in what they’re doing. They’re using broad paint brushes. And I don’t mind if I’m quoted on this because I’ve said it to the department and I’ve said it to the political guys, “You can’t broad paint brush. One size doesn’t fit all.”

Neil was concerned his views might inadvertently influence the district’s delineation of roles and responsibilities. To counter that concern, he organized a second

workshop conducted by an out-of-district consultant. The focus of that workshop was to decide acceptable parameters of responsibility. Neil spoke about his reasons for using an external consultant.

I believe in school councils and because I'm the boss of my principals, I started getting a little paranoid that my values were jumping in on this so much that I was saying, "Hey, look what I'm doing. It's great!" And I didn't want to do that. So I said I'm going to get somebody from the outside who couldn't give a darn about what was going on. And we were getting basically the same results, so it was kind of neat.

The results of the workshop suggested to Neil that district stakeholders were "tremendously unanimous" in their views of delineation. And while minor differences existed among all groups, a consensus was achieved. The number one priority reported by all groups was that of student achievement. Also ranking high were accountability, input into school programming, financial management and discipline. The one "outlier" according to Neil was that dealing with the hiring and firing of professional staff, a suggestion that was quickly dismissed by the majority.

Neil believed finding ways to monitor the effectiveness of school councils was important. He admitted, however, that was not an easy task. On an informal basis, Neil's visits to the local councils provided an insight into their effectiveness. For as he noted, "Virtually every one that I've been invited to, you get very much a gut feeling about how things are going, how they are structured."

Neil also believed principals' articles in local newspapers provided an informal means for assessing school council effectiveness. Those articles, which highlighted council activities, suggested to him that school councils were both operational and accepted in the district's schools. Neil commented on that assessment.

We've encouraged school councils to talk. Each of our principals writes an article for the newspaper, our two bigger schools do it weekly and our smaller schools do it monthly or something like that. And of course I make it my job to read these things, to try to find out what they're saying. And they're talking about school councils in there all the time. But the press themselves haven't picked it up and said, "Hey, there's a problem here." We don't have a problem here. Not here, not locally.

Neil also realized that more formal assessments of school councils and their effectiveness needed to be done. He shared his concerns with that task.

It's really hard to do. You can feel it maybe. You can certainly mark it in terms of achievement exams. Our achievement results are going up phenomenally quickly. At grade three and six, we're now surpassing provincial levels, which is dynamite. We're a school district that traditionally hasn't been able to do that. So that's easy, really easy to track that stuff.

Neil continued.

But can we track where the school councils are helping? I don't think so. I think we can say that the system is helping. Yes, we can probably say that. But we really won't know until that kid is out of grade twelve and in university or being a brick layer or something like that. Then we can ask, "What's their attitude toward education? What's their attitude toward reading?"

Despite the lack of assessment available, Neil was enthusiastic about the future of school councils in the district. He shared that enthusiasm.

One of our schools, with direct input from their school council, set up a heavy duty reading recovery program. What excitement is going on there! It's rippling through the parents and the teachers and the kids! And we get many examples like that. So we're doing a little tracking I guess, but how many we're going to get, I don't know. But it looks good for the future. It really does.

Sharing a Positive Story. Neil felt the story of one school council, with which he was very familiar, aptly demonstrated the positive features associated with increased parental decision making. For the past three years, this school had operated with two formalized parent groups: the school council, organized by the principal; and, the school society, organized by parents. Neil believed its story of transition was a worthy example for others in the district. He began its narrative by explaining why the parents had maintained a separate council.

I could never figure out why the principal just didn't say the school society is the school council. But the school society felt the principal was controlling the school council so much, setting the agenda, not allowing for input, in fact having closed door meetings and that sort of stuff, that it didn't represent the parents' view of the school. In contrast, the principal was part of the society but he didn't set the agenda, in any shape or form, unless he had something to input. And then

he would ask to have stuff put in, but it would be definitely by permission.

With a change in principalship, Neil noted the community began to look at the school in a more positive light. According to Neil, the new principal was very attuned to the needs of the parents and gave them a great deal of input into school affairs. As a result, more community events were held at the school and more parents and community members attended school functions. Parents in the community also began to speak about “their school” and “our teachers.” Within the year, the parent council had voted to dissolve the school society and set up a single school council.

Neil believed the key to the successful implementation of the new school council had been the principal’s willingness to align more closely the school’s needs to those of its community. Neil described the principal’s efforts in seeing it become a reality.

Most of the people in that community attended the same church so there was a strong feeling of values being carried amongst them. Also, it’s an agrarian community, so people’s calendars and things like that tended to work together. And this one started to fly because the principal, who I considered a very wise human being, realized that the key to this community, which was not very pro-education, was to have the parents own education. So he encouraged these folks, in a very gentle manner, to become involved. He took some time. They did a lot of things together, like eating together, as that is very much a farm tradition. That’s how you talk.

And by the fourth year of operation of that school council, the council in conjunction with the staff, put together a Code of Conduct which was how the school operated in terms of student behaviour including consequences. So this freed the principal. The principal was now free to say to a child, “You have broken this rule. This is the consequence.” And, with impunity, he could phone the parent up and say, “This is what’s happened to the child.” If the parent got angry or disagreed, the principal quite comfortably could say, “You know, it’s our Code of Conduct. It’s not mine. It’s not my staff’s. It’s not the superintendent’s. It’s ours. If you disagree with it, and that is certainly your right, please come to the school council and argue. Let’s get it straightened out if it’s wrong.” And it has worked so beautifully.

Neil continued.

Later on they started getting involved in developing their own school calendar that better reflected the agrarian society they were in. So we went from one

extreme to the other. There is no question. The school council is the driver of parental belief in that school. The school has changed very much to reflect what the community is. It's really a super one to be in.

Neil was cautious, however, in believing that full acceptance of school councils would come without a great deal of effort. In particular, Neil believed that school councils and the existing school board would need assistance in understanding their roles and relationships in the new political arena. And, while Neil hoped all stakeholders would give school councils their overwhelming support, he noted the possibility of less existed. Not to be deterred, Neil noted, "Should that happen we would have a problem on our hands, but that's a problem that has to be faced if it comes."

Supporting Cultural Diversity

Neil believed school councils, working in partnership with the school board, could become an important vehicle for parent input into the district's schools. To be successful, however, he felt councils must be permitted flexibility to develop within the cultural parameters of their communities. To do this, Neil believed it was important for the school board to recognize and support uniqueness among the district's councils, especially given the cultural differences within the district. This section highlights the board's attempts to honour that commitment and their rationale for doing so.

School Board Support. Prior to its implementation, Neil identified several groups that needed to "buy into" the concept of school councils. Those groups included the school board, principals, teachers and parents. While each group represented a different set of concerns, Neil believed the school board's acceptance of school councils was critical to the overall success of the concept. He felt that it was important they were seen as supportive of the local school councils, rather than in competition with them. To help this process, Neil focused on "the culture of parents in our communities," and more specifically, "councils as a leading place to bind culture, policies and practices." For as he told his trustees, "If we're more involved and each of us cares more, education is going to be better."

Connecting the district's operational philosophy to the new concept was the main thrust in Neil's work with the school board. That philosophy, developed by the board in a previous year, spoke of parents as customers and urged school board members to view parent satisfaction as a fundamental goal of their decision making. Neil explained how that belief tied into the concept of school councils.

So we're saying those are our customers. The board has that precursor value walking into this thing. So the concept of our customers getting together with our people who are delivering the service is something to be celebrated. That's how we got to the school council level. That was the board's attitude. They weren't afraid of them. They celebrated them. School councils have trustees as part of them. They are defacto members of the school council. Somebody brings a policy problem to school council. The trustee is there. So in effect, they're part of the system. We're not fighting each other. The school councils and the board are part of the same system. It's a chance for parent input.

One council member in the district was especially appreciative of the concessions being made by the board. Paul, chair of the Daviston council, believed much of the credit for the initial success of school councils should go to the school board. In particular, he felt the board's willingness to give up many of their traditional powers, while allowing lay input into decision making at the local school level, was admirable.

Given the move to more lay involvement in all aspects of government, Paul believed the school board was politically wise in throwing its support behind school councils. For as he related, it was not a case of *if* councils would come into existence, but a question of *when* and *with what powers*. Paul spoke about the local board's acceptance of the innovation.

They want them in place. They know this thing is coming. They want to get it in place and they want to make sure they are in place and functioning properly for when the power is distributed. Because when you read in the position paper and even what you pick up here and there, I think it's not a case of '*if*', but definitely a case of '*when*'. So, the better prepared you can be, obviously, the better, because school councils are going to have quite an important powerful role to play in the future.

Paul continued.

We've got, obviously, a very willing school board. They're willing to give up their traditional powers. Now perhaps not in every case will they be so accommodating. But in my personal experience here, we haven't had any problems at all. They've put together workshops at their expense and invited all the school councils around. I think they have gone out of their way to accommodate school councils.

For Paul, forging a strong partnership between the school board and his own council was a prized objective. Paul did note, however, a challenge facing his council. That challenge was being prepared for the new level of involvement and responsibility that were going to be given to school councils. Paul believed it was imperative that school boards and school councils work together on that initiative. He spoke about that belief.

Soon after it was proposed, the sweeping changes and the modification of the Act, it became clear that we're going to have a lot of power, whether we like it or not. We're going to have a lot more than we had. And we're going to have basically as much as we want to take, up to a ceiling. And I think that's quite a high ceiling. We can assume as much power as we can prove competent to run or to manage. So, I say if we're going to have the opportunity to do that, let's do it in concert with the school board. Let's get on with it and let's make sure that we're not losing out because we're not ready.

Uniqueness at the Local Level. Paul believed support for "uniqueness" or "cultural fit" was critical to the eventual success of school councils. And, while he supported a semblance of uniformity within the district's councils, he did not believe the unique cultural characteristics of the district's communities would support complete uniformity. Paul used the example of two culturally unique communities to explain why school boards needed to encourage flexibility among school councils.

I like the idea of flexibility. I don't think it should be mandated one way or another, especially in these early days. Because of the diverse nature of all the different areas, even in our one school district, you need flexibility. Let's make a comparison of Daviston to Montague. Montague is very community minded, very school minded. Their school is their community. A lot of the issues that face us have no place, no relevance to people in Montague.

When you've only got limited players like Montague, it seems quite crystal clear. Whereas when you have different cultures, like in this school, you have to look at

that, especially the religious persuasions. It's not as cut and dried here. There are so many issues that don't pertain to one and do to the other. So when I say uniformity, it's uniformity within the realms of what you're interested in.

Paul felt school councils could provide parents in the district with more authentic involvement in their children's education. Remembering the previous parent councils and their lack of authenticity, Paul reiterated his enthusiasm for the new councils.

I'm quite enthused with the way it's going, the new councils. I'm not a power hound. I'm not enthused just because the school council will have more say. I think that power, responsibility and accountability all go together. If you have one, you should have the others. The way the old school councils were, it was my opinion that they were more informal discussion groups. You didn't really have a lot of input. You didn't have any authority or power, not really much of anything. You were just a conduit.

The challenge now, according to Paul, was to ensure school councils and the school board find ways to work together, to build on individual strengths while recognizing the need for uniqueness. A closer working relationship among the district's councils was one way Paul saw this happening. He shared the importance of that happening.

Even with our own division, it's quite a large division, and diverse in many ways. So the more that we can share with other councils and get uniformity with that, I think that will ease the whole role of school councils, rather than everybody pulling at the support. We need that support. We need our school board's support. We're not the same without it.

Leading by Example

In both the Willow Ridge and Daviston councils, the chairs took an active role to ensure their councils would be effective organizations. This section details the methods they used including becoming knowledgeable about the public education system, soliciting input from community and council members, and determining the focus and extent of their council's involvement.

Becoming Knowledgeable

Daviston Composite. Paul, chair of the Daviston council, believed one of his main responsibilities was to become knowledgeable about the role parents could play in the Canadian education system. Because he was formally educated outside Canada, understanding the complexities of the public education system took a great deal of initiative. Paul shared his one remaining area of discomfort.

The only thing that I have a little difficulty with is when we start getting into programming and things like credits and what not. The only reason I feel a tad reticent about that is that I wasn't educated in this system. So grades and credits and things don't mean a lot to me because I never experienced them personally. I was educated in the UK in a grammar school system. And in that system you had years but you didn't have grades and credits. You didn't do that. It wasn't structured so. So I have a little difficulty having a meaningful conversation about things like grades and credits because they don't mean anything to me.

Paul believed assessing his level of understanding on a topic was easy for himself and others. He described how that understanding was revealed.

I am aware of it if we get into a debate on a particular topic, and if I thought it was floundering or the whole debate was getting away from us, then that would indicate to me that I don't have enough understanding of the issue to control it, to stream it in the right direction. When I say stream it, I don't mean lead people's opinions. I mean keep it relevant and keep it factual so that we can come to a conclusion. And it's my opinion anyway, that if you've got a chairperson who doesn't have a broad enough grasp of the subject, the meeting will start to develop into side conversations. It will run away because you can't keep the focus.

Paul continued, describing his methods for dealing with his own lack of understanding.

I just let everybody else speak about it and then if I have a particular question, although it may sound foolish to some, I ask. I mean I would have to ask, "What is the relevance of credits in such a grade?" We were discussing recently the timetable loads at junior high. Now I don't even know what junior high encompasses in terms of years. So obviously, if you've been educated in the system, you know when you're in junior high and when you stop being in junior high. But I never did that.

Paul didn't hesitate to ask questions. In fact, he believed his willingness to ask

questions sent a message to the rest of the council. Paul spoke about that belief.

Am I reluctant? Absolutely not. I mean if I don't know, I ask. If I think it's necessary that I need to know, then I have to ask. It's a good model for others on council, too. Because I think perhaps they perceive if the chair is willing to ask out of not knowing, then you don't have to be reticent. Plus, we have our five-word statement that we built; *No questions are bad questions*.

One individual whom Paul believed was integral in helping himself and other members of the council feel informed was Karen, the school's principal. Paul noted she regularly shared information from Alberta Education, central office and the school. This was an aspect of her involvement that Paul deemed very important. Karen agreed it was an important role, noting her primary responsibility to the council was "to keep them informed, to let them know what is presently going on, what has gone on in the past and what is to come."

Karen also felt being a member of the school council was important for her vice principal. She saw his presence signaling to parents that the administrative team valued the council's initiatives, while adding support and credibility to the information she shared. For as Karen noted, "We fulfil the same role on council, sharing, supporting one another and backing one another on issues."

While Paul found the information being shared by the administration helpful, he believed additional means were available for councils wanting to become more informed. One was a provincial alliance of school councils, currently being formulated. Paul believed this alliance had the potential to create "an information linkage" among Alberta school councils. And while he did not see the alliance circumventing the province's responsibility to school councils, he did see it as a means to move information more effectively. Paul spoke about the alliance and its promise.

I'd like to see more direct flow of information from the department of education and the policy makers, but it could become a function of this alliance of school councils. It's very difficult to conduct a meeting when you have received very little of that information and we are the people trying to debate it. I've received what I read in the newspapers and second hand opinion. Now I don't want to be delivered the Act every five minutes, obviously, but if something's in the wind that's going to impact school councils, I'd like to see some kind of medium so

that we can get that information.

Paul continued.

I think if this alliance of councils gets formed properly, then I think it will be that medium. The information can be distributed to that group and then they can distribute it within the province. I don't think you can expect the government to deliver policy to 4200 different school councils, however, you could deliver it to a central point, like the way a trade union's information would be distributed, or a professional association, through that method. Then we can all peruse the information at the same time. I don't know if that alliance is going to be Alberta wide, but I would like our group to be in it because I think that the more you share, the more uniform we can become.

Willow Ridge. Pam, co-chair of the Willow Ridge council, was also educated in the British school system. And while she had concerns about her understanding of the Canadian system, she did not feel alone in her efforts to become more knowledgeable. Pam felt many, including the principal, were supportive of those efforts. She reflected upon the role they played in helping all members become more knowledgeable.

I went to a school in a British school system which is different from here in a lot of ways. So I'm afraid I can't rely on my own. I feel as a council we have to put a lot of trust in our principal because we do rely on him heavily to advise us in areas where we don't feel we are capable of making a decision. But I think also that we have a responsibility to look beyond that. If there's some issue that comes up and we're not too comfortable with the explanation, we can certainly call another school and talk to someone there. We can also call the board or talk to the superintendent. There hasn't been such an issue yet, but I'm sure at some point there will be. At that time the question will be, "Are we qualified to handle it and how much input do we need from the teachers and the principal?"

An area where Pam felt most members of her council were unsure was that of the school budget. Pam believed that members could handle the responsibility of overseeing the budget, but needed the district to provide ongoing assistance. Pam spoke about that need.

I hope we'll work on the budget, an understanding of the budget, just a general understanding, because that's coming in next. I have my share of knowledge. I've got that covered as an accountant, but there are many members on our council who are not as comfortable with it and yet we will have to face it. We will get a

lot of input from the school obviously. They know exactly where you need most of it, but some decisions will be left to us. Decisions like where do we want to spend the difference? Which one of these subjects needs the most materials? And we don't have a lot of money to oversee, so we really have to watch and spend it wisely.

Pam felt one way to become more knowledgeable about the budget and other areas was to attend as many functions and inservices as possible. As co-chair, she relished the opportunity to be seen as "high-profile," to meet and discuss educational matters with fellow chairs, school trustees, district administrators and school principals. Pam shared her memories of a recent workshop where she met school council chairs and principals.

It was a great experience. It gave us a chance to talk to them, to discuss some of the problems that they have. It also allowed us to get some response and opinions on concerns we have in common. Because of culture and religion, those concerns were slightly different in some areas, but that has to be expected.

Workshops such as those gave Pam a better understanding of the intricacies of the district and the education system. She felt it was important that the district continue to offer those workshops and that council members be encouraged to take advantage of them. Pam explained why she found the workshops so beneficial.

It's important that workshops be provided for school council members. I found that very helpful and I think there could be follow-up workshops which would certainly help. In our workshops, we did a number of case studies, scenarios, possible things that could happen in school councils which were a real eye opener. We did some budget work. We talked about principals and the teachers and things that we can expect from them and what they expect from us. I think overall it gave school council representatives a broad view across the board, what people want from their schools and what their school is doing and what direction they hope to go in.

Not unlike Pam, co-chair Jeannette had concerns about her knowledge of the educational system. A Metis woman educated in a residential school, she found much of the public system difficult to understand. Not content to remain at that level of understanding, however, Jeannette hoped her involvement with the school council would lead to a better understanding. She chose the school council because she felt discussing

matters with the school principal gave her an opportunity to vicariously experience life at the school.

Jeannette appreciated the principal's patience and understanding with all members of the council, especially those unfamiliar with the workings of the public school system. She felt the principal's willingness to share his knowledge and expertise with the council had been instrumental in making them feel valued and respected. Jeannette believed other council members felt the same way. For as she noted,

It has always been that way as far as I'm concerned. Because he's the top guy in this business, you have to go to him. We're not always going to agree with what he says and does, that's where the council comes in, I guess. But I think he's very important to us.

Even with her principal's guidance, Jeannette feared members of the Metis community would be critical of her efforts on the council.

I still have mixed feelings about it, about this new role that's supposed to be coming up for the school councils. I fear taking full responsibility—of knowing what you're supposed to do when maybe you don't. I also fear the public criticizing us, not the parent part, just the general public. If a parent says to the school council, "Okay, you're on school council, you do it this way" then it's like you have no business doing it any other way. Now if I'm on council I should be able to say, "I was there. You weren't," and be comfortable with that. But what I fear most is that people are going to come in and criticize me for what I'm trying to do, what I think is right.

The area that most concerned Jeannette was "supervising million dollar budgets."

How do I feel? Actually a little bit scared. I would say that when the school fully takes over the funding and all that, I'm really afraid whether we would be doing the right thing and spending the money the right way. I like the general meeting, discussing things about the school, little things like what was happening in the day, or what the school did that week or the week before and, what they're going to do. I like that part. I just am not keen on the budgeting part. I don't know if we'll be prepared for it. But I guess if it's handed to us, we will have to know what we're going to do with it. But I don't feel I have enough experience to deal with that yet, so it's a little scary.

Despite the potential for criticism from her community, Jeannette was not ready to cease her involvement with the school council. For as she hypothesized,

If the criticism happens, I think I'm just going to say, "If you're that interested, you come to these meetings and I'll discuss it there." That's all I could say. I'm not about to drop the row because of them. If you as a parent are that concerned, I've learned from experience that you will be there. I'm happy to be in this role and I'm happy to know that I can do something for the school. I'm trying at least. When I'm sitting on the other side and people start pointing a finger at me, I don't know if I'll be so happy and say that I'm enjoying this. But right now I can say it's going all right. I don't mind it at all.

Soliciting Input

The chairs of both councils believed that determining a variety of viewpoints before taking action on any item was important. By doing so, the chairs believed they were increasing the likelihood that council decisions would be supported by the majority of stakeholders. This section details their thoughts on soliciting the viewpoint of the fellow members of council, staff, and the silent majority, those community members who did not sit on the council.

From the Community. Paul, chair of the Daviston council, believed school councils should be "two way vehicles," not only passing down policy from the district office but "soliciting opinions and having tools to present them to the authority." To do that, he believed it was his responsibility to solicit as wide a perspective as possible. Paul spoke about that responsibility and how he attempted to accomplish it.

I go and seek it. I've lived here a long time. There are many, many people that I know personally. And even the ones that I don't know, probably know of me. So if I phone anyone and tell them who I am, most of the people that I ask their opinions of know who I am or probably why I'm asking and are willing to share whatever opinion they might have.

Paul continued.

I usually tap the vine. I don't like to speak from some obscure point of view, even if it were my particular choice. Even if it wasn't that important to me personally, I think as a chair you have a responsibility to that. You have to represent both the public generally, the parents specifically, and the students and even the board as well. It becomes a burden sometimes. If I phone up several people at random, first of all I have to explain what I'm trying to get at, why is this such an issue in the first place. And a lot of these people don't have all the background that I do. Obviously they don't. Some people are quite . . . well. They don't really care.

Other people care vehemently, but perhaps for the wrong reasons. So you have to juggle. It's a bit of a juggle is what it is.

Pam, co-chair of the Willow Ridge council, believed her council had been effective in establishing the community's viewpoint on important issues. She noted, however, that their task was not an easy one, especially among the Metis population. Pam explained why that was so.

I try to get a good cross section because usually we try to get people from different backgrounds. We try to make it representative but many seem to be quiet. They're not vocal. You have to really draw them out. Once you've made an attempt to involve them, I think they do like having input. But they seem to be intimidated very easily and tend to back down and sort of remain quiet instead of approaching adversaries.

Pam continued.

We've got what we feel are the views of the majority of our parents but it's important to represent even the silent ones. You have to talk to them. Even knowing makes a difference. I believe it's to our advantage to have their input, even if we are just informing them. You have to get out there and get some feedback and usually if there's no feedback, it's a good thing. But even in a small, quiet community like this, when there is something of concern, you'll hear it sort of rippling down in the bottom. So as long as you're willing to listen, you'll know if there's a problem.

Pam enjoyed the challenges involved in soliciting the community's viewpoint. She felt she had been elected co-chair because "I don't shut up" and because she was actively involved in many aspects of community life. It was this involvement that Pam felt made her identifiable and respected in that role. She didn't know, however, what she could do to make it easier for parents to share their viewpoints on school issues. She already took time to talk with parents at every possible social gathering, including hockey games and community fund-raisers. One thing Pam did feel certain about, however, was that those informal methods were favorable to most members of her community. For as she noted,

I get a lot more success on an informal basis than if I had to visit formally. I don't know if they are just more comfortable sitting over coffee with parents. Maybe

it's more of a structured environment to come into the school. It's an appointment time with the principal. As school council members, we make an effort to go to the community and talk to them. Usually parents identify coming to the principal with problems, so I think it's easier to talk to a parent.

Jeannette, co-chair of the council, agreed her community preferred council members soliciting input through informal means. She equated that preference to a deep-seated fear of public speaking, which she shared. Jeannette felt most successes in soliciting the community's viewpoints could be gained on a one-to-one basis, so she focused her efforts in that regard. She felt it was also important to share with parents what was currently happening at the school. Jeannette believed, for many parents, even informal visits to the school were not feasible given their fear and distrust of the system. She explained how she helped alleviate some of those concerns.

I usually talk to people, just some people, not very many ask, "What do you do at the school council meeting?" You can only talk about things that are public knowledge, nothing confidential, anything confidential we wouldn't do anyway. So I just tell them about the school council, what we do at the school council, what we do for the school, and what we do for the students. I don't try to say too much, just enough to keep them informed.

Co-chair Pam believed that keeping the lines of communication open to other components of her community was important also, especially the business community. She commented upon that need.

One of the objectives of our school council is to try to keep communication open between not only the school and parents but all areas. This is a small community and a lot of what happens in the schools relies heavily on the business community. We need volunteers. We need donations for many things. And if we keep a line of communication open with a positive atmosphere, we feel we will get greater support and better response.

From the Staff. The chairs of both councils believed soliciting the staffs' viewpoints on issues was important. In Daviston, Paul believed the mechanism for doing so was already built into the system, and that was through teacher representation. He was not adverse, however, to having additional teachers or staff members sit on the council. In fact, he debated the positive aspects of that with the district office. It was the district's

belief that the majority of voices on a council should belong to parents not formally associated with the school system. Paul, however, believed that all sources of information, especially those with an inside view of the system, were beneficial to his council.

In Willow Ridge, one teacher representative brought the views of the staff to the council. Members of the school council were also urged to visit the school as often as possible so they could enhance their understanding of its operation. Pam, co-chair of the Willow Ridge council, liked to take these opportunities because she believed much could be gained from them. According to Pam, one such benefit was the strong rapport that could develop between the school staff and members of the council. She elaborated on its development at her school.

I feel very comfortable with our council and I'm really pleased with the way it's going right now. I think we have a good working relationship with the teachers and the principal. We get that by being here, by showing up at the school, stopping for a visit, seeing how things are going. We can walk into each classroom if we wanted to and just have a quick look.

Those visits helped Pam feel a part of the school, something she felt was very important for parents. She also believed it had benefits for herself as chair of the council.

They haven't said I have to go away! But seriously, I do feel comfortable. I feel welcome. And if I just stick my head in to say "Hi," they'll just say, "Come in. We're doing this. Would you like to see?" I like that. I also feel that if I'm around often enough the children will know who I am and that's important, too.

Co-chair Jeannette, however, was not able to make many of those types of visits and that was a great disappointment for her.

I probably don't come in as often as Pam does. She's more involved in it, because I work and I work long hours. I don't always have time. If something comes up, I'm always at work, so I feel bad about that, but I can't help it. I want to be there. I want to support my daughter and the other children, but I can't always find the time. I hope they understand.

From Other Council Members. Soliciting input from fellow council members was deemed important by the chairs. In Willow Ridge, council deliberations were

described as informal, with decisions usually decided by a show of hands. The co-chairs tried to maintain a semiformal atmosphere, relaxing the rules of operation so that members' fears of formal organizations might be allayed. By sustaining such an atmosphere, Pam hoped council members would be encouraged to maintain their membership on the council. She also hoped it would develop a heightened sense of familiarity and understanding of the public education system, a situation not presently existing for many members.

Jeannette felt she took "a fairly active role" in council deliberations. For as she noted, "I have my ideas and I think I voice them enough." She also believed her fellow council members were actively involved in discussions, with members "quite mutual with our agreements and disagreements." Co-chair Pam, however, did not see her fellow council members in the same light.

Pam felt council members were often hesitant to speak out on issues, preferring instead to sit and listen. She found this approach very different from her own and required a passivity on her part that was difficult at times. Pam felt, however, her efforts had been successful. She used the lack of declining enrolment on the council as a gauge of that success.

I tend to overpower people so I have to make a conscious effort to shut up and ask people for their input first before I lay my opinion on them. So yes, I take an active role, but I know I have to really go out of my way to do this first, to call upon everyone and say, "What are your feelings on this?" and "Do you have any suggestions?" And then, when it's all in and everybody has something to say, I give my opinion. But quite often I must reserve my comments until I've heard from the group. I feel because I have a stronger personality, I tend to sway people and that's not fair. Everybody should have a chance to voice their opinion, even if it's different from mine.

Paul, chair of the Daviston council, believed it was his responsibility to see that all sides of issues were debated and that members had equal opportunities to present their views. That included issues initiated by council, and those brought by the district trustee. Paul reflected on that aspect of his role.

As a chair, I try to maintain some order of structure to the meetings so that

contentious issues that are brought up, from both directions, can be aired. And that we get a proper cross-section of opinion, not just one person browbeating the rest. Or similarly, the authority from across the river browbeating the rest, either. Actually, I like to think of it more as a mediation role.

Of continuing concern to Paul, however, were those few individuals who did not respect the council's methods of operation. Paul spoke about those concerns and his methods for dealing with them.

What frustrates me about my role is the repetitious nature of some people's debate. They don't want to debate. They just want to express their point of view. They're not really interested in anyone else's view. I shouldn't say not interested, that's perhaps a little too harsh, but they can only focus on what they came here to say. And therefore, it makes a mash of the meeting in that respect because then these people keep hammering the same point. You can't get consensus because you can't get anyone else to debate.

Paul continued.

When that happens I call a halt to the proceedings as I can and I say, "I think we have to stay on topic. We have a time line to follow here and since we're not getting anywhere with this, we have to move on. All the points are duly noted. I'm sure people have them in mind but now we have to take more of a position to make it into a motion or some kind of resolution. Let's work toward it. And then once we get consensus, not necessarily voted on, but certainly a consensus, then we can proceed."

Paul believed most members of the council respected his efforts to keep the council's meetings running effectively. The fact that most of the council's business was done "with all votes being positive and very few people voting against any motion," indicated to Paul that members were pleased with the process. He spoke about that belief.

I guess it says that either people have listened to the debate and then have made a decision on all the facts or maybe they've just gone along with it for the sake of time. I mean I can't say if people are truly convinced that's the right way to go but I like to think it is in most cases.

Determining Focus

Setting Agendas. Council chairs in both centres were actively involved in

determining the course of action for their councils. One way they did that was setting agendas for their meetings. Pam, co-chair of the Willow Ridge council, felt this was an important aspect of the chair's role. Not only did it affirm her leadership role, but it also provided an opportunity to delineate items that were not acceptable for school council involvement. Pam spoke about that issue.

Usually Jeannette and I make an effort to prepare an agenda. If she's not available because she works shifts, then I do it on my own and then we bring it to the principal. And he will look it over and add whatever comes to him. Quite often, if something comes into his office, he will send it home with my child and I'll get a look at it before the meeting. If there's something that we feel shouldn't be addressed, if it's not a school or teacher issue, then we have guidelines that we can look at. We follow that pretty closely.

Pam continued.

There are certain things that we cannot discuss. And certain things that we as a council feel we do not want to address. For example, anything to do with teachers and disciplining to a large extent is left to the principal. We have guidelines in our handbook and once it gets to a certain point, the principal will bring it to the school council only for support. The decisions are clear in the guidelines on discipline that if the child has got to that point then we've already decided as a group that this is the way that we want this to be dealt with and so the council is there to support our principal.

Paul, chair of the Daviston council, believed determining the council's focus was an important aspect of his role. He believed, however, that his council still had work to do in that regard.

I think as chair you have a certain responsibility yourself to try to do the tedious things like make it your business to have an agenda. Try to get the thing done and try to get the issues addressed that people want addressed even if you have to table them. Make sure they show up on the next one. Have good minutes and what not. Now these things are not all in place yet. I mean we're striving for some of them but at least we are thinking of them ongoing. We're constantly trying to improve this or that because it wasn't just going right. You have to make it right. We're getting there. Sometimes you feel a bit like you're spinning your wheels because what tends to happen right now is we're just fledglings, as I say. Just getting going then some issue comes in.

Paul noted that most issues at the Daviston council were brought forward by the

school administration. The remaining agenda items were contentious issues brought from certain parents to other members of the council. These issues were then given to Paul who usually added them to the agenda. Paul noted the few times that issues were not added were due to time constraints. For as he noted, "The only thing we might limit is the size of our agendas, to keep them the length of the meeting. Two hours is the longest that any meeting should run. After that, I would fear information overload."

Overcoming Frustration. The Daviston council spent a great deal of time trying to decide the aspects of the educational system with which they wanted to be involved. At the first council meeting, potential areas were highlighted and members asked to rank their preferred involvement. Before completing that list, however, Paul believed the council should build a mission statement. He felt this statement would provide an important focus for all of the council's efforts. Paul spoke about the council's involvement in those two processes.

And we did build a mission statement. We spent actually quite a lot of time with that. But when you have a group so diverse as ours, you have to basically come up with some kind of way that you want to go. And then, what we did parallel to that was a wish list, things we'd like to address. Some of them are massive and some of them are quite easily done. So far the biggest was the renovation project and the modification of those plans. Now there was some budget trimming that had to be done but that's a fact of life. To jump up and down and say this is not what we want and deny it, I think that would have been cutting off your nose to spite your face, simply because the funding wouldn't have been there in another year. But in the main, I'm quite happy with our involvement.

One task undertaken by the Daviston council was credit-based funding. It was a task that proved quite daunting for Paul and his council. Paul shared his members' frustrations.

The issue of credit-based funding, now we weren't really up to speed to debate this with any sense of surety because we didn't really know the issue. It's very difficult to debate something that they're going to change when you don't know how it was before. And they've only addressed certain issues of the credit-based funding. What about the people that don't make credits, i.e., the special ed people, the inherent this and that. Where's the funding going to come from for that? Repeaters? We've touched on this debate a bit already but obviously there's so many facts and data that we don't have.

Paul believed continuing to debate the issue was important for the council, even if it were a difficult topic. However, he was concerned that his members could become frustrated if the provincial government continually changed the funding formulas. Paul talked about that concern.

We've been pro-active in that the earlier you can get a start on the way you're trying to go, obviously the better off you are when this thing comes into being. And you know the government tends to procrastinate. They come up with a plan and they implement it and then somebody sweeps up the mess. And that's a bit of a concern to a lot of people, that you're going to start changing the cardinal ground rules here and nobody's really ready for this.

Paul continued.

Some are more ready than others but I'm not sure that there are some school boards in this province that haven't even given it a second thought yet. All of a sudden the money's not going to be there. Then what do you do? And that has far reaching implications. When you start talking about student enrolment dropping off that translates ultimately when you start talking core funding, to terminating contracts and things. I mean, that's the bottom line of all of this. So it's nothing to be toyed with. It's a deep subject.

Making It Happen

School councils in the Kettle Creek School District became a reality in September 1994 with parents, community members and teacher representatives being elected for one year terms. In Willow Ridge, there were not enough participants to have formal elections so all nominations were accepted. In Daviston, many people expressed interest in becoming part of the council. As a result, the council expanded its membership to accommodate the high interest level. This section provides insight into members' reasons for involvement, means for making that involvement effective, and factors involved in the decision making process.

Becoming Involved

Respondents noted three reasons for becoming involved with school councils, and while they were all based on a desire to improve public education, the specific intentions

for each differed. This section details those reasons and members' related concerns.

Supporting Child's Education. For Jeannette and Pam, co-chairs of the Willow Ridge school council, their involvement with the school council reflected a strong belief in parental involvement in public education. For Jeannette, the new council represented an opportunity to learn more about the school system and her daughter's education. She reflected on that opportunity.

I'm trying to learn. It doesn't hurt me to know what's happening in the school. It's of interest to me and to my child as well. My child is proud of me. She says, "Oh, Mom, you're on the school council, you're the chairperson." That makes her feel good. And I say to her, "I expect to see what's happening with the school. It's for you. It's not for me. It's for you."

Pam also saw this as an important reason for her involvement. For as she noted, "I've always been especially interested in education and I feel if I am a part of the council, I have hands-on experience and input into the education of my children and the children who are influencing my children."

And, while the co-chairs believed school councils were an important means to help parents become more involved in their children's education, both had questioned whether the concept was worth pursuing. Pam believed that many parents saw it as redundant, another committee similar to their existing PTA. With time, however, she felt parents realized there were important differences between the two: most notably, the school council would be actively involved in programming and finance, whereas the PTA had dealt primarily with fundraising and organizing special events. When those differences were understood, Pam noted the PTA dissolved and nominations were held for the new school council. And as she explained, "We feel we're going to make a lot more progress with a lot less effort, by doing it this way."

Paul, the chair of the Daviston council, enjoyed his involvement in public education. His main reason for becoming involved with the school council was that his children "were getting toward high school" and he wanted to stay in touch with their education. Paul had served on the school council's predecessor, the Parent Teacher Advisory (PTA), for several years. He believed his initiation of a letter writing

campaign, where he encouraged local residents to advocate for school renovations, heightened his recent nomination as chair. Paul spoke about accepting that position.

I didn't have a problem taking over the role because as I say, I could see what everybody was trying to get at. So I would just summarize it and say, "Is this what we're trying to say?" In addition I wrote a letter on behalf of the PTA encouraging members of the public to get involved. I said, "It's your school. If we don't get a public lobby, we're not going to get the renovations. The time is running out."

Paul continued.

I'm quite comfortable with public speaking. I don't have a problem speaking in front of people. Written text and things like that. I've always been quite good at that. I'm also British. I think that helped. Plus, what I do for a living tends to make it easier for me to do that. So I just ended up being a natural mouth piece. I guess you could look at it that way.

Paul believed school councils, given their wider mandate than school boards, could be more flexible in their approach to education. He felt trustees typically viewed issues from a district perspective, with local trustees often unable to advance the causes of individual schools. As a council that represented one school and one parent body, Paul believed the local parent body could more accurately respond to their needs. Because of that, Paul believed his many hours of phone calling and networking in the community were valuable uses of his time. Eventually, he expected they would pay dividends to not only his children, but other children as well.

Sharing Expertise. Not unlike the chairs, the two teacher members of the Daviston council saw their involvement as a desire to be more engaged in their children's education. Tracy, a teacher representative, traced her involvement on the council to her children's future attendance at the composite school. She was not involved with her children's primary school council, for as she noted, "There's no need. I feel no need. That school runs very, very smoothly and I think it's because they're dealing with younger children. Things are much easier."

Tracy did feel, however, being involved in the Daviston council was important. For as she explained, "I still intend to teach here for at least 10 years. I will have kids of

my own in this school and from both perspectives, it's important that I have a say in what's going on here."

For Janet, a teacher and parent representative on the council, interest in membership began during the previous year. Impressed by the potential to make a difference, she began soliciting community personnel for their involvement. Janet talked about those efforts.

I had been interested in it last year. I heard the parent council was going to have more of an impact on schooling. So I talked to a few people who had quit during the summer. Then a bunch of us got together and started discussing things. We called different people who we thought would be interested and would be workers, because we thought if the parent council was going to work, it would have to be people that were concerned and would work. We just didn't want people on there that weren't going to do anything.

Janet believed the sheer size of the council aided her election. Setting the membership at 21 allowed almost everyone who ran to be elected, a feature Janet found positive. Janet also believed her involvement in community affairs helped her election for as she noted, "I have been an active member of this community and anything that involves children, I've taken a very active part in it. I guess that's probably one of the reasons."

Both Tracy and Janet liked the fact that teachers could bring the viewpoint of students to the school council, voices that both women felt were important to the school council. Janet spoke about her efforts to bring student issues to the council.

I like to think I represent the kids, in part. I hear a lot of things from the kids and even this issue on whole credit or full credits for grade 10. A few of the grade 9s were upset. I spoke to some of the grade 12s that aren't graduating this year and they said they wished the school had done something different. A lot of parents talked to me. I always discuss school and they see me as a teacher and not just as a parent. I'm active in a lot of groups so I have contact with a lot of people.

Tracy believed that teachers had a decided advantage over administrators when representing student voices. She felt that administrators, because of their lack of classroom involvement, were often out of touch with the everyday realities of school. She elaborated on those thoughts.

The teachers' viewpoint has to be there. It absolutely has to be. At the moment, the administration represents the administration. They represent the good of the kids from a different viewpoint than the staff. Administrative staff don't always see the good of the kids in the same light. It's necessary to have both of them. They don't always see kids at the classroom level because they don't teach. Our vice principal does a little bit this year, but often they don't. They don't see kids on the playgrounds and the problems that are sometimes created because of their decisions. So it's necessary to have both.

Both teachers were committed to helping other members of their council understand the complexities of the educational system. One of the most frustrating aspects of that involvement, however, was the realization that parents knew very little about their children's education. Janet spoke about that concern.

Especially with this credit-based funding, they asked my input as a teacher. What I would feel as a teacher? So it's hard for me as a parent and a teacher. I guess it would probably be easier if my husband were on the council. But on the other hand, I think it's good to have as many teachers involved as possible because they are the people that are in the know and are hired to teach.

Janet continued.

I just feel that parents are closer to the issues and what they want to happen for their children, especially if you talk to other people in the community. But a lot of these parents don't have a clue what's going on. They're well-educated people, professional people, but they have no inkling of the school system or what's happening here. Some parents don't even know their kids have dropped courses. That should not be happening. They should know that and I think we have to make that a top issue.

When it came to helping lay individuals understand the complexities of the educational system, Janet felt school councils had a decided advantage over school boards. She believed that was because parents had "an inside view" of schools; an insight provided by teachers such as herself. Janet elaborated on that belief.

What we try to do with ours, and as I say there are no official guidelines, we try to be much more constructive than the school board. I think the parents know their community better, but I think they need to be better educated about their school. But I'm not sure that's an issue for a lot of board members. When they join the board, they don't really know what's going on. I think the teachers know though, because they hear the kid's point of view which is . . . well, they're not lying or

anything, but it's certainly not always the best point of view. I think parents need to take more control and they need to learn what's going on in their school. I guess, however, I find that to be the most frustrating part of my role. As a teacher, I know what's going on but they don't.

Wanting Change. Cathy, a parent representative on the Daviston council, had a definitive reason for becoming involved with the school council. She felt her involvement might lead to a stronger voice for herself and other parents at the local school level. This was important to Cathy because she felt her daughter and others had been unfairly treated at the school. She had concerns about whether the council could achieve this goal, or if in fact it was just a fundraising mechanism. Cathy spoke about that concern.

When the parent council first came to be three years ago in Daviston, I showed up and that [fundraising] was all we were good for. The principal so much as just said, "I'm hoping that our major role as the parent council will be to raise funds for new library books." I was nominated and I turned it down. I said, "Listen, I'm involved in three other fundraising initiatives in this community. I will not become involved in another one."

Cathy felt the present council was also being unfairly targeted as a source of volunteer labour by the school.

Things keep coming to the school council. I'm a working person and I'm sorry, I don't have time to commit as a volunteer. If I want to be a volunteer, which I have been, I would probably be approaching my children's teachers directly. Now that I'm working, I'm sorry. I don't have time for that. But is that what we are? Tell us, are we just a core of volunteers easy to access?

Or are we supposed to be helping the decision-making process? I guess I fear that we won't have any power, that we'll end up just being the volunteers. But then I also fear lack of knowledge, lack of willingness to let the administration do their job. So I guess I fear too much and I fear too little. Does that make sense?

Cathy hoped parent voices would be heard on important issues such as discipline and harassment. Cathy had a vested interest in seeing this happen because she believed her daughter and her best friend's son had been victims of harassment while at the school. Because of that treatment, both adolescents chose to attend school 500 kilometers away

from their families. Cathy spoke about the frustrations involved in that move.

My daughter goes to school 500 kilometers away. My daughter goes there because of social problems in the school, harassment in the halls including sexual harassment and just lowering of self esteem. I spent a lot of time bringing up a girl who's got very firm opinions and is not scared to speak her mind, who has a healthy self esteem without being too egotistical. This could be a mother thing, sorry I get talking about my daughter, but I'm proud of this kid. She's extremely bright. She does very, very well at a school and I end up having to send her away for grade nine? She's only 14 and she's living five hours away? This is not fair to her. Why are we punishing her? She's not doing anything wrong.

Cathy continued, documenting the frustrations she felt when attempting to deal with the ongoing situation.

I wish I had kept some of the nasty notes that were slipped into my daughter's desk because they were crude. I am not a fundamentalist. I can crack a dirty joke along with the rest of them but this stuff disgusted me. These are things that my daughter can legitimately lay charges against. We had her starting to document when this happened, who was around at the time, etc. I wanted the time, the date and anyone who was around to hear the harassment. But I finally relented and said my daughter could move away. When I did, the girl quit doing it. But to me, I don't think the school is taking this seriously enough. They say, "Oh, kids will be kids." It's not kids will be kids.

Those experiences influenced Cathy's decision to run for the school council. In doing so, however, she felt isolated and embittered. Cathy spoke about the ongoing disappointment she felt with the council and her personal determination to see her daughter's issue addressed.

At the beginning of the school year, I had high hopes. The reason I came on school council is the principal said we would be looking at writing a student code of ethics. And I thought, "That's what I want to be apart of." But we haven't done anything on that yet. There's been no real direction.

But I'm reluctant to follow through because I feel my opinions are invalid. I'm really reluctant to say, "Guys, why don't we do that student code of ethics?" I know it's happened to other kids. What I want to see is harassment being liable for suspension. I want to see kids who harass other kids in schools being suspended for three days. But what terrifies me is if my opinion on small issues doesn't count, what is the reaction to this going to be? I guess I will just have to brace myself for a battle on this issue.

Removing Roadblocks

In order for school councils to be effective, many potential roadblocks needed to be recognized and eliminated. In this section, communication barriers and one principal's new approach to dealing with his council are shared. To begin, respondents discuss the importance of establishing and maintaining open lines of communication.

Promoting Effective Communication. An operational aspect deemed critical to the success of school councils was open and effective communication. Neil, the district's superintendent, believed this meant parents having the opportunity to be heard at both the local and district levels. He spoke about how he saw that happening in the district.

Our trustees are bringing the concerns of the school councils to the table. We always allow for agenda input from trustees and they do come up. If there's a real concern, usually myself or the deputy are invited out to the schools and then we will bring it to the board table. There is also a time designated in every meeting for public delegations. So if the school council wanted to talk to the board, they could come in. Sometimes concerns come up in school councils. A trustee will phone me and I can give an answer really quickly and something like that is settled. But sometimes it comes to the table and it's discussed all around. And sometimes we send stuff back to council that way. It's a very informal network.

However, Neil believed it was also important that the district make that network more formalized. He believed doing so might eliminate potential roadblocks such as "gate-keeping." Neil explained the rationale behind such an initiative.

We have two routes, formal and informal. The informal one is in place now. The formal one is coming. We have a policy coming out on school councils right now. Most policy takes three or four months to get done but we're prepared to drag our feet on this one, to make sure that we get a lot of input because we don't know where the province's eggs are going and a few things like that at this point. But we have had it adopted as first reading by board members. And it says that board members will report to school councils. In each school council, if the trustee doesn't make it that night, they will report to them. And we've also directed principals to take board information to their school councils. And so, hopefully, by doubling your communication, the wise parent is going to see a little gate-keeping going on.

Neil was aware this move would not guarantee disbursement of relevant information so he was prepared to go one step further. He spoke about that next step in

which principals would be directed to share specific items with their councils.

I work through the principals. That's the only group that I communicate with directly. Obviously there are teacher committees and things like that, but as a general rule that is the one group I communicate with. And I will say to the principals, "I think that the school councils should be involved in this."

Sometimes I say that a school council must be involved in this. Now of course, you have a chance for double gate-keeping, too. But I really don't think it's the superintendent's job to communicate directly to school councils, unless they have a question. I've always used the rule that politicians talk to politicians and administrators talk to administrators. Even though school councils are not politicians, in a lot of ways they are. So if I want to get something to a school council it should be through my administration or I encourage the politicians to talk to them.

Paul, chair of the Daviston council, believed the district's support for increased communication had fostered a much-needed change at the local school level, so much so that a "new era" was occurring at his school. He spoke about its evolution.

I think we have a good relationship. As I alluded to earlier, in the old days with past principals and the original set up of the parent council, I felt personally that it was more of a tool to get policies delivered. Whereas it certainly should do that, but it should also collect public information, public opinion and funnel it the other way. With certain past administrations, I found that it didn't necessarily happen in the reverse direction.

Paul believed establishing open lines of communication throughout the district was important for school councils. He felt it was especially important that the school board and district office be aware of his council's initiatives. In order for that to happen, he structured his council's meetings to accommodate that exchange. Paul explained the rationale behind that move and concessions made by his council members.

We traditionally met on Wednesdays but we've changed that to Mondays to fit in with the board meetings on the following day. One of our trustees always comes to our meetings and that gives us an in. We also can get an idea of what their agenda is going to be so if we've got anything to put in we can do that. Now that we have restructured our meeting to fit in with their board meetings, we can get input to their meetings and also we get something of what's coming back, too.

Paul continued.

That didn't please everybody in our group because traditionally we had always done it on Wednesdays. So people have structured their lives around Wednesday. But we only moved it a very short lot. It perhaps wasn't the best thing for me to move it to Monday, but since it's what's best for the council, we have to go with it. Because I think there's a valuable tool there. If we hadn't moved it, we would have lost it. It's not all wine and roses yet, but we've got a structure. We've got it started and it's rolling. And I think a measure of our success would be that we haven't lost people wholesale, that people haven't stopped showing up because they can't get anywhere. But we'll see.

Establishing New Approaches. Bill, principal at Willow Ridge, had many years of experience working with parent groups and felt his methods for dealing with them had undergone significant changes since the school council's inception. Bill shared his new approach to school councils.

In the old role, it was sort of a tell and sell method. "This is what's happening. Do you like it?" And I think it became obvious when one of my school council members said, "We didn't accomplish anything." I don't remember doing anything, either. We were just here. And now they're saying, "Hey, it's not just a tell and sell. We have input now and good input. This is what we feel. This is what we would like to see." And that's what's made it exciting.

Bill believed his method of working with the council, while it was still undergoing change, demonstrated a growing partnership between the home and the school. He spoke about his current methods.

Knowing my personality, it's probably more of a dominating type role. And then, all of a sudden, "Oops!" Then it's, "What do you think?" And then they don't say anything because I've basically said it all for them. And I would say that's an issue, well not an issue but that's something that I have to develop as we get more and more into this. With their leadership and agenda making, there will be a principal's area where what concerns me will be addressed. So it will take away the focus of me doing the dominating in a discussion. I have a vote on council. I can vote. But I don't vote because I usually sway them into what I want anyway. But I think with the change in my role, I'll still have my input and therefore we can work together to build a consensus.

According to Bill, one aftermath of this differing approach was the mutual respect developing between himself and the two co-chairs. Bill believed trust was the cornerstone of its development. He spoke about that development.

One thing that was established, and it was established very early with the two leaders, is this feeling of trust. I know they don't have the expertise. Once I said, "Hey, here's the budget. Give me your input." And they said, "You know best what to spend it on." I was even going to make up a phony budget with say three thousand dollars for a silk plant but I chose not to. But I think as they get more experience, get more involved in the process, it will change.

Bill continued.

But I'm comfortable with it right now. I think it's a two-way street. You know when there's an element of trust for them, when they say to me, "How are things going? What is different? What is happening?" And you explain it to them and you say, "How do you feel things are?" And they give you their exact input. We're not treading on anyone's toes but if they feel strongly about something, they certainly will let you know. Not in a negative way, but "What can we do about it?"

Bill felt a recent district-level meeting illustrated the trust developing between the council and himself. At that meeting, principals and school chairs were involved in role playing different aspects of school life. Bill explained what happened at that meeting.

It became evident at one of our meetings we had. It was set up by the school division and I was really pleased because we had school council chairpersons there. And one of the topics was this element of achievement tests. We had this mini scenario in which my role was answering questions from the parent's side. And my co-chair focused on something after the discussion was over. She said, "What can we do to help you?" And even though it was a scenario and I was only role-playing, I got this feeling from her and from my school council, that they want to play a role in that. So that's where the trust comes in.

Pam, co-chair of the council, also believed that a high level of trust and cooperation existed between the staff and the school council. She believed an incident in which a request to ban a reading series from the school illustrated that point. Pam shared that incident and its successful resolution.

A couple of years ago we were looking at some books that were in the school system, the Impressions series. And that brought quite a bit of controversy so we brought the books in and sent them home with our school council members. And then we made the public aware that the books were available if they wanted to have a look. At the time, our staff and principal felt that the books were not as bad as they were being made out to be. Although they weren't the primary books

used in our school, they were available to the students and the teachers.

Pam continued.

So I called a few parents who had children in other schools and asked them what the feeling was there. I got the expected response which was that one Mennonite community was very much against this and Daviston was sort of wavering. Our school council made the decision to keep the books and trust the judgment of the teachers and principal. We trusted them to eliminate the stories that they didn't feel were appropriate. It wasn't a big issue.

Bill liked the opportunity to work collaboratively with his school council. He believed the most fulfilling aspect of that relationship was the "sharing of information, getting them involved in some type of input. But more than that it's a feeling of satisfaction that you've at least communicated some things to somebody and hopefully they take it further from there."

One aspect of his community that Bill felt had a definite advantage in developing a sense of partnership was its small size. Bill spoke about that advantage.

I think one of the things that has to be known, one of the nice things in our community, is that we know everyone. And that is very important because you can get a principal who doesn't know everyone, like we do in our school district. We know every parent in our communities. That could be an apprehensive point of view, where you walk into your first general meeting and these people get elected and then afterwards you meet. And you don't know these individuals. You don't know what platform they're coming with. And I think that's scary.

Conducting Business

Respondents became involved with school councils because they believed they could make a difference in children's educational experiences. This section details aspects of their decision making efforts including taking risks, establishing committees, making decisions and respecting boundaries.

Taking Risks. Karen, principal of Daviston Composite, felt her administrative team had taken risks in the past by bringing sensitive issues to the council. For the most part, she was pleased with the results. According to Karen, one of the most pleasing aspects of working with the council was the support she felt from that group. For as she

noted,

When we have the opportunity to present a concern to council and we feel that we've got the support of them, that they are willing to work with us to achieve a certain goal or they're willing to work with us to take care of a certain concern, that's the most pleasing thing.

The following incident, in which the council and staff worked together to address problems related to credit-based funding, was one of those successful ventures. Karen described that meeting.

It happened just recently, at our last council meeting. It was a special meeting we called. We wanted to discuss with our parents the whole aspect of schools being funded based on high school credits. And council was right behind us on this one, 100 percent of the way. Our parents said things like, "When I was in school we had no choice. I had to take a full timetable. There were no such things as spares when I was in high school. Your schedule was laid out for you. You were told this is what you will do and there were no questions asked about it. You did it. You didn't even think of dropping a course, where this is what students are doing today. They're starting a course and three weeks into it they're dropping it because it's not interesting or they don't like the teacher or for whatever reason. They want some free time. But we can't afford that."

Karen continued.

They know if we don't do something about demanding more from our students we're going to be faced with fewer dollars in our school. And they're not willing to settle for fewer dollars because they know we can't operate on fewer dollars or it's going to be very difficult for us to do so. So they're willing to work with us to put policy into place where we're going to mandate that students take a certain number of courses. They were right behind us on this one.

Bill, principal of Willow Ridge, saw an important change in the way parents at the school viewed their involvement with the school council. He believed that was because parents were now being invited to participate in discussions and decisions about matters that were important to them. Pam, co-chair of the school council, talked about that involvement.

We have a lot more input into the programming, direct involvement in the schools. We're doing budgeting. I find we are doing a lot more of the correspondence that comes into the school which our principal used to handle at

one point. At the moment we're working with the ECS program and the government changes to that. We've been approached by the MLAs to get a petition going, to see if we can come up with some changes to go back to 400 hours of paid instruction time.

Extending the invitation for parents to be more involved in the school, however, was not without risk. Bill spoke about the risks taken by his staff.

Before, we didn't look at things like curriculum. We never even discussed them. We sort of gave them a little picture, the maintenance type things, like "Let's worry about bingos." I think there's probably more of an overseeing role now because they're taking an interest in education, and by education I mean the curriculum. Now they are saying to us, "Why are we doing this? What's happening?" I used to make up the agenda and, like I say, tell and sell. Now I say, "You guys are making up this agenda." So they're looking to me for information and it has to be there.

One of Bill's greatest pleasures was seeing parents involved in meaningful decision making. He believed parents were more willing to ask curriculum-related questions of him and his staff, now that the invitation to do so had been extended. Bill believed a recent achievement issue illustrated that point. He described that issue.

In March we tested kids because we had a real problem. It had been identified that we had more and more kids going to special education. So the staff established a school goal for reading recovery. When we came into September that was our major focus for the building. And then we started to say, "Hey, we have to communicate this to parents, tell them this is what we're doing."

Bill continued.

And so we brought it to our first council meeting and it took off from there. And the school council kept asking how were things going, on an informal basis. They wanted the results. They wanted to know about the results, what was happening. And I think that's good, instead of just giving them the information, now we give it so they can know more. And they want to know why and more. They want to know, "Okay, if this, then why not that?" School roles, reading recovery, everything. They want to know more.

Bill believed with proper structure and guidance, collaborating on effective decision making was possible for parents and the school's professional staff. For that to happen, Bill believed that parents had to be told the truth about school issues, even if it

meant putting staff in an uncomfortable position. For as he noted,

I think if parents get involved in the education issues, not the maintenance type items like special events, that's cut and dried. But if they get involved in achievement testing, I don't think you can keep it from them, you can't give them biased information. And when you give them the results, you will have to be prepared for the tough questions: "Why are we flunking social studies? Why are our scores so poor? What's happening in this building?"

Bill felt being open and honest with their school councils wasn't always easy for professional educators. He suspected years of adverse programming, where principals were encouraged to withhold the truth, stood in its way. Bill believed the current practice of sharing achievement test results with parents was one way, however, that professional educators could be coaxed from their insecurities. He shared those thoughts.

I think in previous years we lied to parents and I don't think there was a school that didn't, we as in principals and as in professional teachers. So we gave the results to our parents. We didn't do that in the past. I said, "Here's where we're at. Our grade 6 science report is poor, really poor. Our knowledge is good, but our process questions are terrible." And one of the questions I got was, "Well, what are you going to do about it?" And I said, "Well, we've established a school goal looking into this, to work on process skills for grades 4, 5 and 6." That's where their input is coming in. It's more than the tell and sell method of the past.

Bill understood his staff's reluctance to share achievement test results. He felt many staff, not only in his own school, but in many small schools, faced a similar concern. He talked about that concern.

I think the staff, at least I perceive them to be, quite apprehensive about school councils, because of what they hear on television, that they're going to hire and fire people, stuff like that. It's important because if staff are uncomfortable, and let's use an example, "Gee, our science test results were poor and you're going to go to council tonight? That's going to be a reflection on me, which means I'm going to be talked about." Having a small school where everyone knows who the grade teachers are, doesn't work. We need to change the focus. We need to say, "Hey, grade 1 and 2 are also involved, grade 4 and 5 are involved, too." It's very important for teachers to be comfortable with it. But how do I help them overcome it? I don't know at this time. I would probably say, "Come to the meetings." But then again, do I want all 12 people there? That may be an intimidation factor. I think it needs to be pursued a bit more.

And while Bill wished more of his community would ask questions, he also understood their apprehension. Bill believed an incident in which the council made a decision, only to see it overturned by other communities' interests, did not bode well for his council. Bill was concerned results such as that one could hinder his council's future involvement in important issues. He did not want to see that happen, especially given the gains made to date.

The incident involved the district's rewriting of the cold weather policy, a policy that would determine the minimum temperature for discontinuing bus service due to extreme weather conditions. Members of the Willow Ridge council appreciated the district's efforts to solicit input from all councils before making its decision, but many felt the decision should have been left at the local level. Jeannette, co-chair of the council, spoke about the resulting bitterness and frustration felt by members of her council.

We are the parents and we are responsible for them as well as the bus driver. I know they're looking out for children and they're parents too, but they just said, "No, 35 below wasn't cold enough for children to be staying home and missing school." I suppose you could see that too, because sometimes the children do miss a lot of school. And there are cold spells, but I don't know. I still think it's very wrong. We didn't do well on that one. A lot of people said 35 below wasn't cold enough for a bus not to run. What about our children if they have to stand out there? And what if we're not home and our children are dropped off the bus and it's colder than that? We said things like that, but it just didn't go over. Those are our children on that bus. It should have been our decision.

Establishing Committees. To help the decision making process at Daviston Composite, the council divided its 21 members into subcommittees. Paul, the council's chair, spoke about the formation of his school council and his contentment with its structure.

A lot of the legwork can be done in the subcommittee, and then you only bring the proposal and the question to the meeting as a whole. And that's an attempt to not limit the debate, but certainly manage it. Personally, I perceive that's the way to be. I don't think you can have everyone debating every issue. Otherwise, you don't ever get anything resolved.

Karen, the school's principal, agreed. She spoke about the rationale behind that decision.

Earlier on, before we had established our committees, we found it really, really cumbersome to come to any kind of a decision at council because we have 21 elected members on council. And that's where the final decisions are made. But if you bring an issue to that large group, you never come to any kind of a conclusion without just going around and around in conversation or in discussion. So we've broken off into committees and these committees come to council with motions. We haven't had a chance to bring any motions to council yet, because we've just got underway. But I think it's going to be a very effective way of running it.

The Daviston council took volunteers for each committee, a strategy that Paul felt could be improved in future years. He commented upon its shortcomings.

This year, general rule of thumb, the dry topics like setting up policy were difficult to get volunteers for. Because not only do you have to define what you're trying to achieve by the policy, but you've got to get input from all the sources . . . what input the board has, what other schools do with theirs. There's a lot of fact finding and data research to do with that one, if you're going to do it properly. Because it's our first year, we didn't really look into who might have the best background. We just said, "Okay, we need five people for finance, who'll be willing to give it a whirl?" Of course, you've got to start somewhere. That's not to say we can't revisit that in the future.

Two parent representatives, however, had concerns with the lack of guidelines for the committees. Cathy felt more could have been accomplished by identifying and utilizing the talents of council members on specific committees. Janet felt more could be done to establish working parameters for the committees. She shared her frustrations with the committee structure.

Right now nobody knows how to set up these committees. We're just sort of fumbling around. There are no guidelines for anything. We've already had people drop off because of the time commitment. That's why we took 21 because we assumed that a few would eventually drop off. But it is a problem. I guess it should be like a board where people are committed to areas for three years. But that's nothing that we've touched. There are no policies or guidelines or anything.

Janet continued.

You have no model to look at, nothing to follow. Nothing. That's a frustrating point with me. It's sort of like the first few meetings, we were just sort of haphazardly going at it, saying, "We should do this, we should do that." We had lists all over the walls. And you know physically, you're just not capable of accomplishing that. Maybe you should take two of those issues, but not all. You just can't be expected to tackle too many items in one year.

Despite her frustrations, Janet was optimistic about the council's future role in decision making. She believed it had the potential to be an effective decision making body. She shared that optimism, beginning with the council's solution to the formidable task of deciding where to begin.

We, as a whole group, decided what we would focus on. The stuff was sort of thrown at us and we had to say, "Okay, let's put this on the back burner." So we're just in the process of starting. We haven't really tackled a whole lot of important issues yet. But we've broken into small groups and each group does something and reports back to council. That's an advantage because you know what it's like to have 21 people talk. With the smaller groups at least you get some work done and you can bring the finished product back to the larger group and ask for their input. But we haven't really done anything yet, like really done anything constructive as far as I can see, towards the education. But I think as it goes on it will be better. I think the most important part for me will be the fact that Daviston will do what Daviston wants, not what the whole district wants.

Paul feared the time required for subcommittee and whole committee work might discourage some parents from participating in the decision making process. He also questioned whether asking volunteers for such large amounts of their time was fair.

I think they might become very time consuming. Because presently we have our monthly meeting of the whole plus you have these subcommittees. So depending upon what issue you've taken off the wish list, how many facts and data you have to gather, there can be a need for a lot of subcommittee work. And of course the majority of the people that belong to these councils are usually quite busy people. They're business people or they're in other groups. The vast majority are there because they are those kind of people. So trying to structure even a subcommittee meeting where you can get three of your five people together is not always easy. So I can see as we get more and more empowered and burdened by more decision making, that will need to be addressed. But I ask, where is the time going to come from to do this properly?

Making Decisions. Paul, the chair of the Daviston council, believed parents, if

they were to be a valued and respected part of the decision making process, must have the right to final say on building issues. Paul elaborated on that belief.

I don't see a need for day to day business being escalated across the river when I think it's very much a building issue. I think it should be in this building. I think it should be just like the budget process. And now they're taking steps to do that, to come down to school-based budgeting. So I think all decisions, except the most critical ones, should be made in this building.

Tracy, a teacher representative on the council, liked the council's decision making efforts. She felt, however, that members often relied too heavily on the school's professional staff when making decisions.

We've broken into committees within the council. There's a finance committee doing some work on budget, getting information from the administrators on budget things. But it's not like they make motions, recommendations I guess. At the moment, anything that comes up that actually is a real school issue like the elementary computers, the school council just says, "Yeah, whatever the staff thinks, we'll support it." They do that because I don't think they know what's going on. They're certainly asking questions as quickly as they can and each of these groups does try to do that. But it's really difficult, especially with the funding stuff, because I don't think our administration even knows what's happening.

And while Tracy would not classify the council's working relationship as amicable, she did believe it was effective.

I think most parents that are on council are pretty sharp. Number one, they care. I guess that's why they're there to start with because it means giving up their time. And they're a pretty sharp group. They're quite willing to challenge each other, not in a feisty sort of way, but to not just back down and accept one person pushing them around. I think it's a pretty balanced group. At the moment, it's a good balance of people.

But I guess it's like any group, there's the good, the bad and the ugly days. There are issues that are more dear to some than others. And yes, there are some strong personalities. When they feel strongly about an issue, you know about it. And that's good because at least they do speak out and you know where you're coming from and where they're coming from. All in all it's a pretty good place.

Janet, a teacher and parent representative, had similar views. She felt comfortable as a member of the school council and believed parents should be trusted to make the

important decisions. She shared that belief.

I haven't had much to do with the parent council until now. I have nothing to fear from parent council, I don't think. I think if you have the right parents in there, it's just the same as the right school board. By right, I mean parents that aren't all radical parents. We need reasonable parents, parents that will come in and see what's going on. I don't see them any different from a school board. I wouldn't want them to have the ultimate power, mind you, some parents that is. But I think it should remain a decision between parents and the administration.

One area where Janet felt the Daviston council had made inroads was on the issue of credit-based funding.

We're working on the credit-based thing. A lot of schools are sitting there waiting to find out what's going to happen, because nobody knows. But we've already set guidelines. If we're going to lose money these are the steps we're going to take. We're going to ask that our students take full timetables. We're not going to let it be easy for them to drop classes. And we've set up parent meetings and we're phoning parents to come to meetings to explain to them the situation that we're in. If their kids don't stay in school, programs are going to be cut, funding is going to be cut, teachers are going to be cut, and they're going to pay, ultimately. They're not going to have the freedom that they've had before.

They've handed the problem to us and if we do something with it, we will be a good council. If we don't, then I think we're going to be forgotten about. And I think money wise, we have to be active in order to get funding. I'm anticipating that in two or three years there will be monies set aside for school councils. And I think the loudest person is going to get the money, the people with the programs going and kids in school. I really believe that if it's an active council you're going to get more money. And I think we're way ahead of a lot of councils.

Bill, principal of Willow Ridge, was pleasantly surprised by the board's initiative in helping principals adjust to the new level of parental involvement. They did this through sponsorship of two workshops earlier in the year. More important for Bill's own comfort level, however, was a better understanding of the type of involvement wanted by parents. Bill commented on that critical understanding.

By the way our school district is doing it, by the leadership they're providing. "Here's an inservice. Here's where we think you should be involved in." And they're making general policies that we had input into. But surprisingly, if you read our superintendent's results from the workshop, the first thing everyone was concerned about was the achievement tests, the achievement in our school district.

They weren't concerned about this teacher or that teacher. So it wasn't personal and that's helpful to know.

Bill shared a recent event that illustrated the positive aspects of involving the council in decision making. That event dealt with censorship and had been a difficult one for his staff. Bill described the problem.

We had a controversial book in our school and regardless of the title, it dealt with incest. So one of the kids managed to take it home and it was a kid from one of our families that happened to be quite religious. They felt that this should have been a topic that their child shouldn't have access to but it was in our library.

Bill talked about the council's solution to the problem.

And so I brought the book to council. I got enough copies and circulated the book through our entire school council and asked them to read it. And I said in the next meeting, "Give me your opinion on it." And I stepped aside on that one, whether the book should go in the library or if it should not. And they chose to put it in the library. And so there is a comfort there, knowing that they will take a stand. And I never got flack back about it, so that creates an additional comfort level for me.

Another example shared by Bill involved a board decision that had created concerns for both the parents and the school staff. That issue involved the district policy of having a district-wide calendar for all its schools. Bill felt the school council and staff should have been given the joint responsibility of devising their own calendar. He acknowledged, however, that school council would still need guidance on issues such as these. Bill commented on that belief.

Take our Christmas holiday for example. Most of our parents are staying here until tonight because of our Christmas concert. And now they've got to race out and do what they need to do. Some parents would have chosen to take their kids earlier. But I think if we closed earlier, such as yesterday, we wouldn't have this problem. Setting school calendars, I think this is the type of thing that we can do together. With school council partnerships, we *can* make it better. I think they're ready. I just don't think they've had the opportunity yet. But they will also need some instruction, some help with their decision making.

Respecting Boundaries. Paul, the chair of the Daviston council, fully supported parental involvement in decision making. He believed there were some decisions,

however, that should not fall within the decision making domain of parents. Paul outlined those areas, which he described as ethical.

Let's say disciplinary hearings against students or teachers, things that then become very ethical and very professional in nature. I don't think lay people have any business with that. That's not to say that we can't generate facts and information and have input. But I think at that point then it becomes the board, the trustees, or the appeal committee's responsibility which should certainly be in place above councils.

Paul believed his council had the "where-with-all" not to delve in questionable areas. To date, he felt they had been successful in this regard. However, Paul realized there were no guarantees that it would not happen in the future. Should it come to that, Paul believed it was an individual's responsibility to recognize and respond to the inappropriateness of the situation. Paul commented upon that situation.

The ethical question, that's a personal thing. I mean you know yourself that there's a professional ethic there and if it comes to anything that's approaching thin ice, as it were, then you have to steal yourself away. Or I guess at the end of the day, if it were so contentious, you'd have to remove yourself from the meeting. There have been some issues where we've not got to that degree, but certainly started to approach that area. And people have enough where-with-all to realize that.

Paul felt some individuals might stray into such areas because of a misguided sense of power and authority. To counter that, Paul believed it was important that all members recognize their limitations and the limitations of the lay body. Paul elaborated on that belief.

I don't have the background or enough of the raw knowledge to have any real delegated power, delegated authority. Because I wouldn't feel comfortable with the authority if I didn't have the backing. And I'm not one for authority without accountability. And in order to have accountability, I must have the facts and data. So if I don't have them all, I'd rather be a lay person. And therefore I think that school councils not purely, but in the main, should be advisors. But advisory with enough weight to sway an opinion, but not necessarily force it into being.

Emerging Issues

This section highlights five areas of concern discussed by the respondents. They

include membership, teachers on council, lay involvement, roles and responsibilities and protocol. Within each of these categories are subcategories containing specific concerns. It is important to note that concerns were not addressed by all respondents, and in one instance, it was a single respondent who spoke to a particular issue.

Membership

Under-Representation. One issue faced by both councils was adequate representation of their communities' distinct populations. At Willow Ridge, this was a double-edged sword, for not only were they unable to attract members representative of the community's diversity, they also had difficulties getting the minimum number of parent representatives.

Bill, principal of the school, noted his small community's population consisted of "mainly Metis, a few treaty, some Mennonite population and professional service people like the RCMP." He recognized the difficulties involved in getting representation from many segments of that population and was especially concerned with the native and Metis peoples' lack of involvement. He spoke about that concern.

We have a lot of diverse cultures and what we try to do is to elect, appoint or coerce somehow, people from the various backgrounds. We want native people on our council, our Metis, our lower socioeconomic status people and so on. That's intentional because I think what happens is that if you just have your professional people on the school councils, that one group wouldn't be in touch with the community. They would be making decisions based upon their lifestyle and their feelings, rather than what other people feel.

Jeannette and Pam, co-chairs of the Willow Ridge council, were also concerned with the council's lack of representativeness. Both chairs tried to attract people from the community's identifiable populations but felt "we always come up against a brick wall." Pam elaborated on their efforts.

We'll advertise in the school newsletter and if anybody is interested they can call. If not we'll elect someone from the people that do show. We already have one parent who wants to join. But unfortunately when we have our first meeting, it is known to the public that this is an election meeting. If they don't wish to be a part of the group, they stay home. So quite often we'll not get as many as we

would like to have and then we have to appoint the missing bodies. Usually the council will go through the parent list with the principal and say, “We would like representation from this group. Could we call these people and see if they would be willing to help?” Unfortunately, it’s usually the native population that is missing.

Jeannette felt many in her community did not understand the integral role that the council played in education. Previously, the school council had been concerned with “fundraising, not the actual running of the school.” She hoped more parents would realize the council’s new roles and responsibilities. She spoke about that hope.

I would like to see the people that make decisions be the local people. I don’t think I would want to be criticized if I did make a decision that they thought was wrong, but I would surely like them to come to the meetings and voice their opinions. But I don’t even know if the people in this community realize what’s happening.

Jeannette continued.

We had barely enough parents for a council this year. I don’t know why more parents aren’t interested in being on a council. They do come to the school and they’re here for interviews and all that kind of stuff. But that is something that I’ve often wondered. As a parent, when I wasn’t on a council, I used to think, “Goodness, I should be going to these meetings. I should be showing my interest for my child and I’m not.” You’re not being a very good role model when your kid says, “My mom doesn’t go to those kinds of meetings.” I felt really guilty about that. So then I started to think, “Gee, what do I have to lose? I could be learning something by going to these meetings.”

Jeannette’s co-chair, Pam, expressed similar concerns. She noted her council consisted of an executive, but very few active members. She elaborated on the problem.

We have an executive but it would be wonderful if more parents attended our meetings. Our meetings are open to anyone who wants to come, but we don’t have many attending. We may have the odd parent who is not on council drop in from time to time, but not active. They just sit and listen. Usually we are about to discuss something that is of interest to them. Unfortunately, it’s often controversial.

Describing the situation as frustrating, Pam noted her main goal was to increase membership, especially among the large Metis population. She talked about that goal and

the frustration she felt in trying to achieve it.

It's frustrating trying to get more parents involved, trying to reach more parents, trying to encourage them to come out. In school and at school activities, I can talk to them. I can call them and quite often they will say "I'll be there," and then they don't come. And that's very annoying. I'm not sure I know why they don't come. We're not expecting anything of them. We are not saying you have to speak in public. You just have to be here. Just come in and listen and just be there. Lend some support by your presence. And yet, we can't seem to draw them out. I find that to be a most frustrating part of the job.

Bill, principal at Willow Ridge, was also frustrated by the lack of parental involvement. However, he believed in the future, membership may become more favorable. Bill spoke about that belief.

What frustrates me is being a member of school council is the lack of parents who choose to be involved. We go to elections and we get the same fifteen people out and the same seven nominated. I think it's a fear of schools. We have always said this is the way schools are going to be operated and so they naturally expect that's the way it's going to be. But I do envision a change process occurring as they get more and more into the development of what's happening in the school. I think there will be more and more interest in this community.

At Daviston, lack of parental involvement was not an issue. That council had more than 20 members, all of whom were involved in subcommittees such as finance, policy and attendance. For its inaugural year, the council had decided to let all interested persons sit on the council, rather than limit that number. Paul believed "having the opportunity to be involved in huge issues and great big fundamental changes of direction" was the reason many of the large group's members remained involved. For as he noted,

I like to be part of that and I think a lot of people do. We haven't lost many people from our group yet, so that's an encouraging sign. It's a lot of work. When we meet for those 2 hours, we're busy. We're busy for those 2 hours. But people are staying with it and that's good. We're getting there. We're certainly not up to speed, but we've got some committees. We've got some bare bones flushed in. It's just a case of experience now and adjusting the size of some of the subcommittees, maybe shuffling some of the players that might be more comfortable here and there.

Cathy, a parent representative on the council, did not see things the same way.

She felt the size of the council was a detriment to its operation. She talked about that belief.

The difficulty I have is with the way it was selected. They were going to do elections, elections for a small group of people. It turned out we got more than what was recommended. Then somebody came up with the bright idea, "Well, let's pick the three we don't like!" So they just said, "No. We'll take everybody because we're going to lose somebody." We're going to lose people. And we have. It only stands to reason with a group that large. So I think there should be a firm rule, if you miss three meetings in a row, then you're toast. You're gone. You're history. You're no longer a member of that council.

Cathy continued.

If I was talking to Klein right now, I'd tell him, "Well, Ralph, you've got a good idea there. I admire the fact that regionalization has hacked down an awful lot of extraneous spending. I think you've got a good idea. But you're not giving us a clear enough map." What I think they should have done when they set up these regulations is said, "Okay, as a parent council, these are the first things you must do." And that should include board members missing meetings. We need these. Even if they're just policies. But these policies have got to be, not policies for the school because that is how they're interpreted, but policies for the school council. Lay down a few of the rules. It might even need to be an ABC thing.

Lack of representation was an issue that brought agreement among the Daviston respondents. Karen, principal of Daviston Composite, believed it was unfortunate that the council represented only a small fraction of the community. She felt many current members had been diligent in their efforts to attract members from the native, rural and religious segments. Karen spoke about their efforts.

When we met in the summertime to establish our council they said they wanted to see fair representation, because how parents from the country view certain things would be different from parents in the town. They tried desperately to get representation from the rural area as well as the urban area. Unfortunately, they weren't as successful as what they had hoped to be. Another thing they looked at was the number of native students in our school, the number of Mennonites and then the Caucasians. And like the rural representation, we don't have native representation on council. Unfortunately, we don't have it. So our representation on council isn't as accurate as it should be.

Paul, chair of the council, agreed that representation was important. He also

believed that having a balance of professionals and lay individuals on the council was important. Paul was willing to debate that issue with both the district office and school administration. He elaborated on that effort.

What we try to do with ours, and as I say there are no official guidelines, we try to structure it so that we have a balance of religious backgrounds. We try to have some urban and some rural people because obviously there are some issues pertaining to rural people that don't to urban and vice versa. We also tried to get a balance of professional teachers who are parents as well. We tried to make that very clear to the authorities and even the administration, that there can be members of the council as elected teacher reps, which we have. Or you can have people there who are teachers and parents of children in this school, and they can also be there as parents.

Paul explained the reason for seeking such a balance.

I felt if we were going to have a meaningful council, we would need a balance in order to debate. If everybody there doesn't care about an issue and they're the majority at the meeting, how are you ever going to get a debate?

Neil, the district's superintendent, recognized the need to increase representation on school councils. And while he did not support an unlimited number of school staff members on the councils, he did see the need to encourage representation by other groups. However, Neil was concerned that such representation could divide the councils among ethnic or religious lines. Neil elaborated on that concern.

In one of our communities there are five churches. And they are all very strong and even though they're all of one persuasion, one is very, very conservative and one would be more mainline, like a Baptist church or something like that, somewhat more liberal comparatively. And we know in that particular community that each one of these groups really has a view of what's happening in the school—some positive views and some very negative views. And we would like to see some of that voice in there. I guess we just have to hope and encourage that school council to say, "Yes, that person should have a seat on council."

Neil continued, noting the solution to the problem could create more difficulties than the original problem.

But I'm still fighting with that. We're also fighting with getting minority groups involved. I don't see a major problem where you've got something like a First Nations group because they're an organized group and again, you can legislate it;

“Okay, First Nations will have x number of seats as compared to the population.” But I’m fighting with legislating representation. I’m still dealing with it inside me. And I don’t have the answers. You’ll notice that the school council policy doesn’t even deal with it.

Social Elite

According to Karen, principal of Daviston Composite, one consequence of her council’s lack of representation was that it became too populated with “the social elite,” that is, influential community members who were known throughout the community for their involvement in all aspects of community life. And while Karen acknowledged the membership tried to attract others to the council, she was disappointed with their lack of success. She spoke about the implications of having an “elitist” council.

They are known among their social group as being the representatives on school council and I think that’s where we’ve failed somewhat in establishing our school council. We don’t have a wide enough representation of our student body. Not that these parents haven’t tried. They really did try. They made phone calls. They approached people. They contacted people because they actually looked at the demographics of our school and they said, “We have about 40 percent of your students who are rural and about 60 percent urban. Your council should be represented that way.”

Karen continued.

We have some very concerned parents on council. Obviously, they’re the parents who really want their students to do well. They pay attention to what their son or daughter does in school and they want to have a voice on council. However, there’s maybe little things that are done in the school which I term not policy, but more practice than anything. And I find that sometimes when there’s a little thing that they don’t quite agree with the way it’s done. They want it changed. And they may not represent the community feeling, the entire school population, but they want it changed anyway.

Let me give you an example. Two years ago we decided at parent teacher interview time we would hand out report cards to parents at that time. It encourages parents to come to the school because the kids put the pressure on mom and dad. “Get to the school. I want to see my report card. I want to know what my marks are like. I can’t get it. You have to go to pick it up.”

It’s kind of like a carrot hanging there. It works. It got parents out to interviews.

Our attendance at interviews was really good. Unfortunately, the parents who don't care, who normally you don't see in the school, we didn't get all of them. Of those who didn't come, they were the ones who never come to interviews. So the report cards of those students still weren't getting out to those particular parents.

Now these parents on council who are concerned about the education of their sons and daughters, who are somewhat involved in the school, come to interviews. They don't need a carrot. They come anyway. So these parents who are sitting on council, who are the concerned ones say, "Give me the report card. I'll be there. I'll talk to the teachers because I do anyway. Don't make me come to the school to get the report card." So you see, they don't see it in the broad picture.

Cathy, representative on the Daviston council, feared the social elite. She shared their effect upon her involvement.

What do I fear? I fear founding fathers. I fear people with the last name of Smith. I fear that. Don't laugh, I do! I don't like sitting in a packed council meeting at one end of the table and catching a comment at the end where someone is rolling their eyes and saying, "There goes Cathy again." I don't. And that scared me off. So I've been somewhat cautious at meetings. I've been keeping what I have to say very short, very concise, not saying anything if I don't feel I have anything valid to say.

Cathy believed the social elite would continue to dominate the council's elections in future. She felt this would happen because of their high visibility in the community. Cathy was concerned this would jeopardize her future election to the council, especially given some member's dislike for her. She commented on that belief.

We have a lot of different people on council. There's a lot of people there and so, of course, you're bringing all kinds of people. You're bringing housewives. You're bringing people who are head honchos at their jobs and head coaches who run major league teams or minor league teams. They're used to having their voice listened to all the time. They don't take the time to listen to what I might have to say because I am a woman and I am a librarian, and not a professional librarian at that. So what I have to say isn't valued. So let's say we do elections next year. Twelve people, we hold it down to twelve people. The chances of me getting on that board for the election are zero. Absolutely zero because my opinion is not valued.

Cathy was also concerned that other people, especially lesser known individuals,

would receive limited consideration at election time. That concerned her a great deal, however, she felt almost powerless to stop it. She spoke about that concern.

What concerns me about that is that it's going to become a power play. There are people on council that are valuable and there's not a chance of them getting on if it becomes an election by the parent population. Take James Parker. He is a great member of council. He doesn't say much but what he has to say is valid. Always. He sits back and listens. He's not involved in the politics of the council, either. He's one of those individuals who prefers to remain apart from that. He doesn't get involved in that kind of stuff. And yet you look at the people who are involved in everything, like George Davies. Everything he gets into, he's got to run. He is Mr. Popularity.

Cathy continued.

But I'm sorry. I don't think his opinions are any more valid than anybody else. If anything, he's a time waster. Sorry, but to me that's not being very grown up. But listen to me, I'm coming right back with a little kid's attitude of, "If you're going to do that, I'm not going to do anything!" But that's got to change. I'm tossing things over. I'm trying to decide what I should do.

Cathy wished things were different but meanwhile, she was determined to continue her involvement with the council, even if that involvement was limited. She felt addressing the council's lack of representativeness would be a good place to begin. Electing parents by grade level, rather than by area or ethnicity, was one of Cathy's suggestions. Besides reducing the number of social elite on the council, it would also support the under-represented high school population, a feature Cathy believed was necessary. Regardless of the solution, Cathy believed others needed to stand with her in demanding changes. For as she noted,

It's not going to change unless we make some noise. There are too many people that would like to see it stay the way it is. But I am not one of them, and I am just about willing to do or say something to see that it does change. Maybe not today, but soon.

Special Interest Groups

Another membership issue noted by respondents was that of special interest groups infiltrating school councils. And while the superintendent wrestled with the

prospect of inadvertently creating special interest groups by specifying membership criteria along ethnic or religious lines, others felt the potential already existed in their communities. Pam, co-chair of the Willow Ridge council, believed smaller communities, such as her own, were especially vulnerable to special interest groups. She spoke about those concerns.

I am especially concerned about small groups in small communities, interest groups, which is why I feel it's so important that I stay on school council. Because the councils are smaller, you could get the wrong people in there and they could certainly make a difference.

Pam felt there were measures that a council could take to lessen that probability. She spoke about those measures.

I think it's important to have a principal who's strong enough to see that it does not happen. But I know that not every school council gives their principal or chair a vote because I found that out at a workshop that we had. Our principal is considered co-chair of our school council. I feel that his role should be to ensure that a special interest group doesn't come in here and walk all over the missing parents.

Pam continued.

But I don't know if it would happen in this community. I think we have too many people on council who are there for the reason that I am, to ensure that does not happen. There's only seven members on our council, and a majority of seven is only four, that's not hard to swing. So I'd be worried about things like special interest groups, especially if they came in to change things. I am concerned for smaller communities; it could happen in communities of this size although, right now, I don't feel we face that problem.

Jeannette, co-chair of the Willow Ridge council, believed that possibility existed in her community. She felt it was a desire for power that would encourage individuals or special interest groups to seek election for the wrong reasons. Jeannette elaborated on those concerns.

What I fear is that someone may come in, and this is just my way of thinking, that this thing gets going and we may be looked upon a little more than before. Someone else may just want to take a power drive and say, "Okay, if they think they're so important, I'm going to get in there and do this and do that." They may

not be doing the right thing. I don't know. But they'd be going in for a different reason than I am. I'm not going in there for any power trip. I'm going in there for me as a parent and for my child as a student. So I think this could happen in our community though. There are some powerful people just wanting to take the power to feel important.

At Daviston, however, Paul did not believe his council could be inundated by special interest groups. He believed the sheer size of the council protected them from the narrow interests of such groups. Nevertheless, he did believe some groups could use the school council as a sounding board for their own interests. A recent issue in which a small group of parents requested the removal of a particular reading series illustrated that point. Paul described that issue and its successful resolution.

The removal of books—the storm in the teacup. I don't know if you recall Impressions, the reading series. Now I'll say a storm in a teacup because in my view that's exactly what it was. A very small percentage of people had a very pointed reason for that material to be removed. And in my personal opinion, I think it had been vetted through all the stages of getting books on the shelves in schools. There are many processes to follow. And the contentious issue was when they were actually pointed out by a parent. I thought it was very much a storm in a teacup. But then again, these people felt strong enough to have a voice and were greatly concerned.

Paul continued.

Initially, they didn't work through the council but after awhile they did. Because I think they realized if you want to get a point made, you can hammer away as an individual but obviously you get further with your argument if it comes from a group, especially a sanctioned group. The parents expected the council to come up with a resolution to this, to make it right, to have their problem resolved. I think they felt they had no other option, no other input than that.

Tracy, a teacher representative on the council, recalled the same incident. She spoke about her recollection of the issue and the concerns it raised for her.

A few years ago with the reading series, Impressions, we had a great kerfuffle here in the district; parents trying to get books out of the school based on, as it turns out, a lot of false information, a lot of fears on their part that were just totally unreasonable. One very, very strong personality was behind them stirring them up. But when it came right down to it, there really wasn't a big problem and we're still using the books in the school. They're not a problem.

Tracy continued.

But that kind of thing can certainly happen. Without a good, strong legal definition of what this council is allowed and not allowed to do it could happen. If these councils actually ever do have any sort of power, it could happen. Right now they don't seem to. Whether they legally have it or not is beside the point. They're not using it. So it could be a big concern in this community which is still quite transient. You could get a little "clique" in there that becomes pretty much a power click, a political click of a very narrow band of people. We've seen an attempt at it, right in this community, so you have to be careful.

Teachers on Council

As Parent Representatives

A contentious issue in the Kettle Creek School District was the involvement of teachers as parent representatives on the school council. The concern was expressed by the superintendent, principal, and members of the Daviston council. Some respondents felt the dual role compromised the integrity of parent representation. Cathy, a parent representative on the Daviston council, spoke about those concerns.

This is one of the things I feel strongly about. When you have a parent council, it is made up of parents. Teachers are parents too, so we have teacher-parents on council. However, there are also teacher reps. So we end up with three or four teachers on it. They are there because they are parents but that's not what they are doing when they are there. They're still voicing opinions as teachers. They're still as strong as teachers. Everything that they bring up, they bring up from the perspective of a teacher. They're not bringing it up from a perspective of a parent.

Cathy used the incident of computer allocations to reiterate her point. She felt that teachers on her council had unfairly swayed the council's decision in this issue.

Cathy shared that story and her concerns.

I've been on boards where you have to swallow your own opinions. I've sat as a representative on the Regional Library System Board. When you sit as a representative on that board, you cannot bring your own library loyalties with you. You have to sever those. You're on that board for the benefit of the system, not the benefit of your town. So when you look at it, you have to say, "Okay, when I vote on this issue am I voting because of Daviston, or is this really good for the system?" And that's something I don't think is made clear enough. I know it's unfair to say, "Okay, you're a teacher, too. You can't sit on the

council.” But you almost might have to because otherwise, what are you going to end up with? We ended up passing it back to administration, but we ended up passing it back because of two teachers that were on there as parents. And that’s inappropriate.

Cathy did not feel confident, however, to address this issue with her council. For as she noted, “We are talking about very, very vocal people which is why they chose to do it. Non-vocal people don’t sit on councils. It’s only those of us who have a box to beat on that need to be there.”

Neil, the district superintendent, was aware of the situation at Daviston. He offered the following comment on that situation.

In this particular school, and knowing the individuals that are there, they are strong people. They’re strong in the curling club. They lead brownies. I don’t know what they don’t do. They’re articulate and we in the profession often make parents feel inadequate because we’re used to public speaking. And parents are so afraid of it, and then these people come out as the articulate ones. Parents say, “Oh well. I’m personally a heck of a lot smarter than them but . . .” And that concerns me. However, I think that it’s going to change.

Neil talked about the steps he was willing to take to see it did not continue.

I’ve talked about legislating in some way the number of teachers that can be on council, but teachers are parents, too. You can easily legislate how many staff representatives you’ve got. That’s easy. But if somebody ran for a school council position in a high school, was a teacher in the elementary school, but had a child in high school, that person should have access. It’s a tricky situation.

Janet, a teacher sitting on the Daviston council as a parent representative, felt that singling out teachers for limited involvement was unfair. She became involved with the council because “I wanted to make education a good place for kids.” Janet acknowledged, however, that being a teacher and a member of the council were difficult. She spoke about those difficulties.

I find it difficult because I see things happening that I guess the parents wouldn’t see. For example, the renovations at our school, where certain monies have been spent. I don’t agree with certain aspects of it, I guess. My pet peeve is the library. I want to see that money spent in the library and we’ve sort of stalled off that issue. I know that as a staff member. And yet, I can’t talk about it because I

guess it's a conflict of interest. It's a conflict of interest because parents don't have the information that I do. But it's public monies. They're entitled to know about it, but whether they ask for it, or see it, is a different story.

According to Janet, there were other aspects of the dual role that frustrated her.

She shared the one that concerned her the most.

The fact that I can't say everything that I want to say. The fact that some information is not meant for sharing, that it's confidential. That's the most frustrating part. I don't think you can get around it. I think it's just part of being a parent and a teacher. I don't think there's anyway around it because you're bound by your confidentiality. That's what frustrates me the most, when I know that this is being discussed and I can't say anything.

Janet did not feel her status as teacher and parent representative created a conflict of interest. She was aware, however, that others did not view her involvement in the same way. Janet spoke about her feelings on that issue and why she felt teachers, such as herself, were a valuable commodity for any school council.

I'm quite vocal. You probably know that. But I don't see it as a problem. I wouldn't hesitate to bring information to council if I felt it couldn't be solved elsewhere. People see me as a teacher so they tend to ask myself and another teacher on council. There are other teachers on council. We're active in the community and most people know us. Two of us have been here 14 years and they know that we've been in the school system a long time. They know us personally so they tend to ask us more for opinions. I like to get involved in most discussions. And the parents look to you, and they'll say, "What do you think as a teacher?"

Janet continued.

Especially with this credit-based funding and everything, they asked my input as a teacher. What I would feel as a teacher? So it's hard for me as a parent and a teacher. I guess it would probably be easier if my husband were on the council. But on the other hand, I think it's good to have as many teachers involved as possible because they are the people that are in the know and are hired to teach. I like to think I represent the kids, in part. I hear a lot of things from the kids and even this issue on whole credit or full credits for grade 10. A few of the grade 9s were upset. I spoke to some of the grade 12s that aren't graduating this year and they said they wished the school would have done something different. A lot of parents talked to me. I always discuss school and they see me as a teacher and not just as a parent. I'm active in a lot of groups so I have contact with lots of people.

As Teacher Representatives

While some respondents questioned whether teachers could separate their dual role as teachers and parents, concerns also surfaced regarding the role of teacher representatives on the Daviston council. Karen, principal of Daviston Composite, wondered whom the teachers represented, and if in fact they believed they represented a viewpoint different from that of the administrative team. She felt, at times, the teachers' representatives were critical of her administrative team, using the council as a tool to voice their own displeasures. Karen also felt they occasionally shared information with the council that was outside their area of responsibility. She felt these occurrences put the school's administrative team in a difficult situation, having to defend judiciously or respond to statements in front of other council members.

Neil, the district's superintendent, also had concerns with teacher representatives on school councils. He was mainly concerned with numbers, for he felt the majority of voices on a council should belong to parents. In some schools, teachers were sending five or more representatives to the council, an action he considered inappropriate and detrimental to the well-being of the council. Neil shared his concerns.

We find staff somewhat defensive. As anybody who has been involved in the education system knows, teachers are sometimes paranoid of parents because sometimes they say nasty things about kids or maybe sometimes kids say nasty things about them at home. Oh, I don't know what causes it, but it's a long-serving mind set, and not only in Alberta, but in others places as well. What we've seen in a couple of our schools is that teachers have got very much on the defensive mode when it comes to their position on school councils. In one school for example, teachers wanted five representatives on the school council. The parents took ten, by the way, so it was a huge school council. Too big.

Not unlike the school's principal, Neil believed this had the potential to create unnecessary anxiety or distrust between the teaching and administrative staffs. He shared that concern.

I got some feedback from some of those people, through the back door, and the teachers were disappointed saying, "Hey, they just wanted to support each other." That's the attitude. I don't know why. In another school they have a school council of about nine or ten people. Of that nine or ten people, five are directly

involved in the education process either as secretaries, teachers in another school or staff representatives. That concerns me because the internal people may be tempted to take it over and have it as a way of manipulating the principal which is the last thing in the world that we want. We don't want the union and where they're going to control the principal and what's going on in that building.

Tracy, one of two teacher representatives on the Daviston council, believed school councils should be "public forums" for teachers' viewpoints. She believed teacher representatives were important because they were an integral source of knowledge for the school council. She explained why she felt that having that knowledge represented was important.

The teachers' viewpoint has to be there. It absolutely has to be. At the moment, the administration represents the administration. They represent the good of the kids from a different viewpoint than the staff. Administrative staff don't always see the good of the kids in the same light. It's necessary to have both of them. They don't always see kids at the classroom level because they don't teach. Our vice principal does a little bit this year, but often they don't. They don't see kids on the playgrounds and the problems that sometimes are created because of their decisions. So it's necessary to have both.

Tracy acknowledged that, at times, it was a difficult role to maintain. She often found it difficult to represent the views of staff members with whom she didn't agree. Tracy shared that sentiment.

Depending on what the issue was, if I knew what most of the staff was feeling about it at the time, then I'd say so. Otherwise, I'd say, "Look, I'm going to have to put this back to them because I don't know." Then, depending on the issue, if there happened to be a staff meeting coming up, I might get at it through that. Or if it was important enough, I might call a staff meeting after school just to clue people in. But I find it difficult to represent the entire staff. I try to put across their viewpoint, but it's really difficult for me when I don't agree with it.

Tracy also believed the role could create animosities between the teachers' representatives and the school administration. However, she did not feel that possibility should limit her involvement on the council. Tracy shared the basis for that belief.

At the moment, there is no real difficulty. I suppose from time to time it could get a little touchy in the sense of saying something that goes counter to what the administrators are saying. To be quite frank, I do feel sometimes that our

administration is trying to pull one over on us, us being the teachers. They do that by giving council their own personal viewpoint of issues, viewpoints which maybe the teachers have already expressed views somewhat contrary to it, but that doesn't come out at council. I certainly do speak up and I don't hesitate to. But again, that could be a touchy situation for staff members. I guess if you feel your position with the school district is firm enough, then you don't have to hesitate. I have to learn to be a little more tactful sometimes about it, but I'm not going to back down.

Tracy felt it was important that parents hear all sides of school issues. An incident in which that almost did not happen supported Tracy's belief that teachers were an integral part of school councils. The incident involved the purchase and allocations of computers at the school. Tracy felt the administration, because of their unwillingness to share all sides of the issue, were not being totally honest with the school council. She shared that story.

I've had an experience where I felt . . . not that they were lying, but I felt that they weren't really fairly representing the strength with which the staff felt on a certain issue. It had to do with computers and I felt that the vice principal was trying to play down how strongly the elementary staff felt about having these computers in their own classrooms. We were talking about the decision to put all nine computers in one room, versus having one in each elementary class. We tried to point out that, because of increased enrolment for next year, we would need that extra classroom space. So now you would be wiring a room for computers and pulling them all out next year because you need the space. And the elementary teachers felt these computers would all quietly sneak their way back into the main lab and we would be without them, because we have very restricted time in the big lab.

Tracy shared her reaction to this incident.

I just didn't feel, and I am not alone on this, that he represented to the council, when he was explaining the decision, just how strongly we really felt about it. Well, I just spoke up and said, "Mr. Lewis, I think the staff was wholly insistent that this be the case," at which point he kind of nodded his head. The parents did go along with our viewpoint. It wasn't a problem, but he had chosen to give the viewpoint that the staff wasn't that solid behind it, so that could have gotten a little touchy. But, I guess that's just part of human relations.

Lay Involvement

The school board and superintendent actively encouraged the district's principals to welcome increased parental involvement. The superintendent, however, was concerned the district's principals were not ready to take on that task. This section details those concerns and principals' reactions to lay involvement in their schools.

Superintendent's concerns

Neil believed district schools could benefit from increased parental involvement in decision making. He was not convinced, however, that his principals were willing, or able, to take on that added responsibility. Neil spoke about those concerns.

Nothing frustrates me about school councils because we're growing into it. But I do have fears, however. I was a school based principal for about 20 years and really enjoyed the process. After leaving the school, I went on as a director and then as an assistant superintendent. In those roles, I observed superintendents working with boards and allowing lay input into the operation of the system and learned how to do it. I had a chance to observe masters all over the province. That was British Columbia. When I applied for the superintendency here, I already had a year and a half of assistantcy under my belt. So I had some concept of how to deal with lay groups of people, to allow good solid input without taking control of things that are really not the lay person's job.

Neil continued.

This is my fear. Most principals don't have that skill. They don't even have that skill with their staffs. They have come out of the generation where principals could be dictators and several of them were. Obviously when we started collegializing the system a little bit, teachers started having more input. But let's face it, teachers are really busy. If they had a good principal running a school, and when it didn't offend the teachers, often it would be so much easier to say, "That's the principal's job. Let them do it." So a lot of our folks aren't equipped yet with the ammunition to work effectively with parent groups.

Neil felt many of his principals were unnecessarily apprehensive about the implementation of school councils. And, while he encouraged them to view councils as a means to "build partnerships between schools and their communities," he acknowledged many principals were uncomfortable with the pending changes. Neil elaborated on their

uneasiness.

It's kind of funny. Our poor principals, sometimes I don't know whether or not they've punched out right now. Everything's coming at these poor dudes from all sorts of angles so they're reacting to certain situations in certain ways. Most are saying to me though that everything gets mucked up because we've got school-based management happening and we've got school councils happening. And they almost have to come together at the same time if you think of the whole picture. So we've been encouraging principals to get involved in the change and to a greater and lesser extent they have. Now there's the provincial government change. They're seeing the change as perhaps bigger than it is. They're a little afraid. They know their inadequacies in dealing with these people and I think they're apprehensive about it.

A basis for that insecurity became apparent at a workshop where representatives from all stakeholder groups were working on roles and responsibilities for school councils. Neil described that workshop and the insight provided into his principals' thinking.

One of the sessions we did when we were putting together school councils was really interesting. We asked our principals, our school councils and our board who their customers were, in three separate groups. This was all one session. And the principals tended to identify students. One of our principals said, "Teachers are our customers." Now he was talking administrative service and not systemic service. The parents unanimously said the parents. The board unanimously said parents. The out-of-sync group, obviously, was the principals, in the way our district sees it now.

Neil went on to describe one principal who was particularly concerned about the decentralization of school management, including the move to increased parental involvement. He noted her frustration, as well as that of her administrative colleagues.

I think they [principals] would probably wish that all we were doing right now was school councils or school-based management because it's too much coming down on these folks. In fact, one of our principals got tremendously frustrated, and this is a very brilliant woman, probably one of the better principals I've seen in my career, who is very much into school-based management. She's getting tremendously frustrated in that we don't even have our principal's meeting anymore, where we just sit down and fight out problems or deal with problems as a group.

Despite the fear that principals might not be ready for increased lay input, Neil

was determined to see it happen. He reiterated his concern for his principals' readiness, while noting the potential that continued to fuel the initiative.

So frustration. I think they are apprehensive because they know it's coming. I think they are maybe slightly frustrated with our jurisdiction in that, philosophically, we believe that school councils are good. We want them to happen. We want them to be in existence in our jurisdiction. We want a good partnership to happen between the whole school culture and the parent culture. We would like to see that.

Tempering that comment, however, was one that Neil shared with his principals on a regular basis. He hoped that comment would encourage his principals to give school councils a sincere effort. For as he stated, "If all this that we are doing in terms of school-based budgeting, school councils, accountability and all this sort of junk, doesn't help that kid in the classroom at all, then it's a waste of bloody time."

Principals' Concerns

The two principals in the study supported the concept of school councils. Both, however, were concerned about the consequences of increased lay involvement. Bill, principal of Willow Ridge, hoped the new entities, with undetermined roles and responsibilities, would not become "mini school boards," similar to the locally elected school board that ran his school prior to 1986. He explained why he feared that happening.

I hope they really don't become mini school boards. And that's something that I'm really against, having been in a building where we had one. For example, in Willow Ridge in the old days, we had our own school board, locally elected, that operated only this school. And so all their decision making became part of this school. Of course, it was the only school they were running, but it became sort of like a school council in the effect that if there were discipline problems, parents went to the local school board.

Bill continued.

Everyone knew everyone else in the building. I'm afraid for that, because it didn't work. Parents got angry, they didn't like a teacher so the board would get on the principal. The board could circumvent the superintendent in this case

because they were local. They could say, "We don't want this guy around" or control what was happening in the classroom. It didn't work.

Bill believed the school board's support of school councils signaled the concept was not a fad to be ignored, but long term entities for the school district. He spoke about that assumption.

I don't think the board is just making verbal statements. I think they've wanted people to have input into their schools, because when you have that, everyone cares about their building or about their school and the education system. So I don't think it's just lip service. I think it's going to happen. I think it's going to be slow to happen, but I think it's going to happen.

Despite his initial concerns, Bill believed schools had little to fear from parental involvement in school affairs. He commented upon that, focusing upon the unlikelihood that parents would place unrealistic demands on schools, especially as it related to the budget process.

We, as in professional educators, have never listened to parents. And I think once they come in and see what's happening, I don't think there's going to be a conflict. And that bothered me at the beginning, like what if I get this protest group coming in and they want our school to specialize in music or philosophy? But I don't think that's going to happen because when people realize how few dollars there are and the aspects of school-based budgeting, the decisions, I think, will be made very reasonably. I'm not afraid of that.

Karen, the principal of Daviston Composite, had initial concerns about involving her school council in an important budget decision. That concern was based on a fear that parents would not support the administration's view of where certain monies should be spent. Karen elaborated on that concern.

The issue was the whole aspect of spending some money that we have sitting in our budget right now that was the result of the school being renovated. There were a certain number of dollars and we made a commitment to spend those dollars in a certain way. And we found that about a month ago we were faced with a situation where it would have been beneficial for us as a school to spend a portion of those dollars in an area that we hadn't addressed already.

Karen described the source of her administration's uncertainty.

And we were debating whether we should just go ahead and spend those dollars on what we thought was an important thing that we felt was necessary, or would it be better to take it to council. And we hesitated there for a minute because council had very strongly told us where they wanted the money to do. They said, "You've got \$50,000 that we want allocated to library resources." And when they said library resources they meant something that the child's going to put in their hands and is going to use. And they had it firm in their minds that we were going to spend \$50,000, maybe no more, but definitely no less.

Karen continued.

And then, unexpectedly, we found ourselves faced with an expenditure of \$2,500 that we thought should go towards consulting services for the purchase of those resources. But we were afraid that council would say, "No. You should have thought of that ahead of time. You should have thought that you were going to need X number of dollars for consulting services. You should have set \$2,500 aside without touching that \$50,000." We didn't do that, so with some hesitancy we took it to council. But they supported it.

Karen believed this positive result would encourage her in future dealings with the school council. However, she felt there were times when that hesitation might continue. According to Karen, those times would be when the administration was unsure of the council's support. She talked about that scenario.

The reason I believe we took it to council was because we knew, we had this gut feeling, that council would support us. And we knew that if they were to get feeling very strongly about this whole idea and if they were willing to take it out into the community and talk to people in the community about it, we'd get more support. Had we thought, "Oh, well. Maybe they're not going to back down and they're not going to support us," we'd have probably waited as long as we could possibly wait to take it, to bring it to their attention. And that is always in the back of your mind. Are they going to support this? Is it something we want to take to council? We're still working on becoming comfortable with that one.

Roles and Responsibilities

A feature promoted by the school district to cultivate understanding and acceptance of school councils was "cultural fit." By that, the district meant school councils should be encouraged to develop in ways that reflected the unique characteristics of their communities. For some, this was a very positive feature; for others, it added to a

growing concern about the misunderstanding of roles and responsibilities for the new entities. This section addresses two of those concerns including lack of understanding and legality.

Lack of Understanding

Janet, a parent representative on the Daviston council, felt lay members of school councils would have difficulty making decisions because they were not involved in the planning processes that often preceded policy implementation. She feared school councils, given their lack of knowledge and time to study issues, would adopt district wide policies rather than research and develop their own. Janet shared those concerns.

I see disadvantages and advantages of parents as advisory or decision making groups. If the parents don't get involved in the school and they don't know the funding, they don't know the budget, they don't know any of that, how can they advise? Or even right now, how can they make decisions without knowing all of this stuff?

So far most of the issues come from the administration. The parents, I don't know of any issues they've brought up. They've been supportive, but several of the people are saying, "How can we make decisions when we don't even know what happens in a school?" Some of them are quite astonished at learning that some high school kids are carrying only one course. And with these new funding criteria, per credit idea, they are lost. They don't even realize that we have kids here that are only taking part courses, part timetables, not full timetables. So there's just tons of stuff like that they don't know.

Tracy, a teacher representative on the council, questioned whether council members were knowledgeable enough to be making important decisions. She felt this lack of knowledge caused fellow council members to be dependent on teachers' or administrators' recommendations when making their decisions. To illustrate that point, she cited the example of a recent computer purchase.

It was an already established fact that the board was giving us the money to buy them. So it really was a matter of "Do we put one in each classroom or do we put them in the main lab?" And again, the parent council felt that they would go with the teachers' recommendation because they said, "How do we know? We don't work there. We don't know enough about it."

Tracy felt the province and district were doing a disservice to school councils by not providing more direction and guidance on the roles and responsibilities of the new councils. She elaborated on the effect that was having on her as a teacher representative.

I guess right now the biggest problem is I don't even understand what these councils are supposed to be or do. At the moment all the council is to me is a sounding board. They raise the issue with the parents. I really feel that we're just running around in the dark, not knowing what in heaven's name we're supposed to be doing. And I know that many parents feel exactly the same way. I'm not trying to sell the idea in the community because I don't even understand what we're supposed to be doing.

If things did not change, Tracy was not optimistic about the future of school councils. She shared those concerns.

In some communities, I just can't see what's going to happen. It's sad to say, but are parents going to take control or are they just going to let things slide? I can see this as a process of decisions between all groups for five years. I'm sure that probably, but who knows, in five years the government will say, "Let's go back to the old school system."

Janet believed fellow professionals on the council were trying to help the lay members understand the complexities of the educational system. She was concerned, however, that other staffs might not be putting in the same effort. Janet spoke about the consequences should that happen.

We're trying to inform them. We have a finance committee on ours and they see the budget. But sometimes parents are going to get in there and they're not going to be in an advisory capacity. They're not going to get this help, to see all the information. Maybe the principal doesn't want to show it to them. Maybe they just don't know about it. So I think something has to be set up. I honestly think the parents should have the final say. It's their money, their children. I think it should rest with the parents but don't think it will. I think it will rest with the administration because the parents aren't ready to take charge right now. They're not quite sure.

Paul, chair of the Daviston council, acknowledged making decisions as a member of a school council was difficult. One reason for this was his own lack of understanding of the educational system. Educated outside Canada, he found parts of the system difficult to understand. He believed members of his council shared similar concerns

although they had been educated within Alberta.

Paul believed the province's lack of information sharing and direction also created a great deal of uncertainty for school council members. He shared that belief.

I think it's very scary that we've changed the way we're doing things and we haven't really explained how we're going to do it. I don't think you can make anybody responsible for a budget or funding, if you don't tell them how or what you're going to base that funding on. How can you do that?

Jeannette and Pam, co-chairs of the Willow Ridge council, were concerned with their lack of knowledge of the budgeting process. Pam was unsure if they could make effective decisions without her principal's assistance. For as she explained, "I feel as a council we have to put a lot of trust in our principal because we do rely on him heavily to advise us in areas where we don't feel we are capable of making a decision."

Pam did feel, however, that parents had an advantage over professional staff when it came to decision making. She spoke about that advantage.

Having children out there ourselves, and also having contact with other parents who have children, we as a school council are able to determine what parents really feel. We can do that because they talk to school council members freely, whereas they would be a little more hesitant to complain to the school. But we do have to depend on our principal and our teachers to help us identify those areas of concern, and certainly, to come up with suggestions of things that we can do to make a change and a difference because of the lack of experience and knowledge of parents in key areas.

Pam was not ready to resign because of her lack of knowledge. Co-chair Jeannette, however, questioned whether she or other parents might be tempted to do so. Jeannette shared her feelings of indecision and insecurity.

Because it's so new, the frustration part isn't there yet. When we actually have to deal with the actual money and all that, I will be concerned. Right now, we're just monitoring it. I don't know how I will feel. When it comes, I guess I will just have to deal with it.

Legality Concerns

The uncertainty about their roles and responsibilities had some members questioning the legal limitations of school councils. Janet, a parent representative on the

Daviston council, spoke about her frustrations as a parent wanting to have a greater say in her children's education.

Nobody is making decisions right now. We tried to set up something in our parent council meeting. We had to run to the superintendent to see if he was in agreement. He's still not sure so he has to go to somebody else. So nobody really knows who has charge, I guess. How much power do we really have? What can we really do, what legally binding things can we do? For example, what if a student said to you, "I am not taking a full course load, I don't care what you say." They are 14 or 15 years old. You can't legally kick them out of school. Can you make them pay for the courses that they're taking because they're not a full time student? We're losing funding because of it but nobody knows anything. We don't know what power we hold as a council because nobody said, "Here. This is what you can do."

Janet continued.

I think what we need is somebody to come to one of our meetings and just tell us, but is there such a person? I would like to know what guidelines we can follow, who does the power rest with, does it still rest with the school board and the superintendent or does it rest with the school administration, the school council? These are just some things that I would like to know because I don't, in a sense, want to waste my time.

Tracy, a teacher representative on the Daviston council, also questioned school councils' decision making authority. She spoke about its uncertainty.

We're being told, partly by our administration, sometimes in the newspaper and on the news in general, that more control is being given to the schools. But nobody has really come out with any plan on how this works. They're saying, "Oh, yes. You're going to be much more involved in budgets. You're going to be involved in all kinds of things." But there aren't any clear guidelines or steps as to exactly what can this school council do. Does it have some kind of authority to set a dress code for the school, for example?

Tracy felt the school council and the teaching staff often overlooked the role that school councils could play. She believed the cause was a lack of definitive guidelines and their newness. She talked about how that affected the council's deliberations.

I think that these councils are still so new. I don't think the staff as a whole or parents as a whole have really taken them into themselves so that they don't think about them and it's really only an issue if it comes up at a staff meeting and somebody happens to say, "Well, maybe that's an issue that the school council

should look at.” But that doesn’t happen very often unless it’s a staff meeting kind of thing. And I gathered from listening to some of the parents who are not teachers, the same kind of thing is happening in the public.

Paul, the chair of the Daviston council, was aware of the legality concern.

However, he believed school councils in the district were being pro-active in addressing that concern. He hoped the work of a local school council alliance would soon allay his councils’ fears regarding the legality issue. Paul spoke about the work of that alliance.

There is a gentleman in the district who formed an alliance of school councils. And they solicited a study by an independent group to look into school councils and one of the questions was the legality question. And basically it addresses a lot of people’s reticence about being on councils, the legal thing. How much am I supposed to know before I make an informed decision? And some of the things that perhaps lay people think they should have no dealings with.

Paul felt that maintaining a good working relationship with the district’s school board was important for his council. He believed this would help his council in understanding the legal and ethical limitations of the two bodies. Both local trustees attended the monthly meetings of the Daviston school council, an arrangement initiated by the Daviston chair. Paul felt this was important for as he rationalized, “I think we are both part of the same team. What I don’t want, what I don’t perceive happening and what I wouldn’t like to see happen, are school councils becoming at odds with school boards.”

Despite the attendance of the local trustees, members of the Daviston school council still had concerns about the legality issue. For Tracy, a teacher representative on the Daviston council, the lack of definitive guidelines exacerbated the problem. She reiterated her concerns.

If one knows legally where they stand, then that takes the scariness out of it. I would fear the board if I didn’t know that they had certain legal restrictions on them. I understand where their powers are coming from and what they can and can’t do. So that’s not a problem. You have a legal challenge to anything that you think is really wrong. But if these councils don’t have that, then I can see all kinds of problems coming out.

Tracy continued.

I guess the biggest frustration is the fact that there aren’t any clear guidelines.

You know with the school board what legally they can do, what their responsibilities are. I know what school responsibility is and what my responsibility as a teacher is. With this, you don't know. Nobody knows and I hate indecision.

Tracy went on to question the wisdom of maintaining school councils if they were not better defined.

What is really frustrating is that you don't know if you're even headed in the right direction. What are we supposed to be doing as a school council? What can we do legally? If it's going to come down to where these councils really are not any more than just an advisory board, then there had better be some pretty clear legal guidelines from the province and the Department of Education. If we're wasting our time because we can't legally do anything, then you might as well give up on it.

Janet felt this lack of clarity created questions regarding "where the power lies" in the new arrangement. Janet shared those concerns.

Will that mean we will have sixteen separate school boards in our district? Or does that mean we have the ultimate power in Daviston, or does the superintendent and the school board still have ultimate power over us? You just don't know and I would like someone to say, "Yes, you have the power. You can go ahead and make policies and decisions and put them through readings and so on," so that's what the parents accept. But this going to the superintendent and the superintendent going to the province or the board, and the board going to the province, you just never get anything accomplished. I guess maybe the province should be the determiner, the Minister of Education. He's the one that should tell us where the power lies.

Janet continued.

It's not that I am power hungry or anything, but I just don't want to waste my time. If I'm going to these meetings and I'm helping make decisions but these decisions don't carry any meat, then there's no sense in doing it. I know very well that the parents on there feel exactly the same way. Several of them have voiced it and people are saying, "Where do we go from here? What are we really doing? Are we just creating a reason to meet sometimes?"

Despite her involvement on the council, Tracy questioned whether the concept was worth continuing. In order for it to be successful, she believed the province needed to clarify the legal limitations of school councils. Tracy spoke about her frustrations with

the present situation.

I really don't feel one way or another about that council. Quite frankly if it disappeared tomorrow, it wouldn't bother me a scrap because I really don't see where it's headed. At the moment though, I think my primary role is to learn as much as I can about what we're supposed to be doing and where we are going and try to clue in other staff members as much as I can. But to me it's exceedingly nebulous.

One issue that addressed the legality of school council decision making involved the "hiring and firing" of district personnel. That issue surfaced during one of the district's workshops. The purpose of the workshop was to find a consensus on the issue of roles and responsibilities for the new councils. Attending the meeting were parents, community members, school board trustees and principals. The superintendent, Neil, spoke about that issue and the ensuing debate.

Staffing, it was addressed. One group wanted to have the ability to hire and fire. But that group was really whacked down hard by all the other groups. They said we don't want to be involved in that but we do want to set standards, which is very much what the department has come up with.

Neil elaborated on the reasons the other groups did not want to become involved.

They said they didn't have the ability to make professional judgements on people, that they didn't know all the information. They couldn't have all the information. They were afraid these things would become popularity contests. But they did want to have input into the hiring of principals because they felt that the principal was so important that they needed to get along with the principal. But when it came to firing, they were just afraid that they would be making judgments based on the wrong things.

Neil acknowledged one aspect of hiring in which school councils could be involved and that was setting the criteria. Neil explained that involvement.

Take that Mennonite school I was talking about. There is a behaviour code in that community. There is also a dress code that has to happen in that community. You will not be accepted in that community if you don't follow them. That's a reality. We've been following those in our hiring for that school. We don't put in any dude in that community who is a Saturday night partier, throwing scotch all over the country, because that person would be shot. It would be uncomfortable for that person and the school. So the schools just want to be able to make sure that is maintained. And we support that.

Bill, principal of Willow Ridge, was concerned, however, that neither the province nor the district had guidelines restricting school councils from their involvement in the dismissal of professional staff. He shared those concerns.

There's a possibility of school councils becoming a very major power player. And I think if that role can be established early, like if there's no hiring and firing, it will be best. I want them involved in the hiring, but the firing aspect has to be our board, our corporate board. Having any other type of involvement would be my apprehension, my fear.

Protocol

Two issues arose as the result of protocol. They were inappropriate items being discussed during council deliberations and lack of respect for fellow council members. The latter pertained to one individual and her feelings of being devalued by other council members. The former was an issue that pertained to both councils and was one that the superintendent believed warranted more attention. The following section details those two issues.

Inappropriate Discussions

Bill, principal of Willow Ridge, believed parents should feel welcome to share their opinions but he had concerns about inappropriate items being discussed during school council meetings. This issue represented his single greatest fear of school councils.

Sometimes they talk about staff and I have to close it off right there. You want to say, "We can talk individually on this," but they are all sort of bombarding you. Like one parent will say, "I have a child in a particular room and I think he should be in the reading recovery program." So you have to stop and you've got to refocus that discussion. What you'd like to say is, "Yes, the reason why your child's not there is because we didn't feel it was necessary at this time." But you can't say that.

Bill explained the reason parents felt the school council was an appropriate forum for such discussions.

I think as individuals we've done this. Parents when they get together like to chat,

especially in this community. They don't care if their child is not doing well. They will still talk about their child. Do you know what I mean? It's not a confidential thing. So automatically at a school council meeting things come up, "My child is failing, what are you guys doing about it?" So you have to step aside and, in fact, try to stop it, but they won't let you stop it sometimes. Away they go and I need to say, "Whoa guys. This is not one of our roles at this time."

Paul, chair of the Daviston council, saw the potential for such abuses occurring at his council. He believed that "stealing themselves away" were important for members when they realized discussions were becoming inappropriate. Paul found one district workshop especially helpful in determining when such discussions were inappropriate. That workshop, conducted by a provincial consultant, used role-playing scenarios to highlight potential problem areas. The workshop also pointed out pro-active steps that could be taken to avert such difficulties.

Despite hosting workshops dealing with the topic, Neil, the district superintendent, was concerned that inappropriate discussions were taking place during council deliberations. He believed the district needed to take two important steps to resolve that issue. They were to help councils better understand their role and help principals become better facilitators of public involvement. Neil spoke about those roles.

I see two roles right now. One is to lead the conceptual development of what a school council is. That's number one. The second is, and I don't know if train is the right word, but get our principals involved in the process of public bodies, and even our parents into that culture as well. Because when you compare school councils to school boards, when you have a new trustee, there's usually several incumbent trustees who enculturate that person really quickly. Whereas right now with school councils, there isn't that enculturation. And because there is no strong leadership of the group, and I'm not being negative to the principals when I say that, I'm afraid some of them are going to run amuck.

Neil shared the problems that could result from this lack of leadership.

I think there's always going to be a temptation, as there is in any public group, looking at a single organization or some form of government, to do a little witch hunting. I'm quite afraid that might happen and we go back to my concern about school councils, with our principals not ready to stand up to the strong parents and say, "Mr. Parent, that is the wrong thing to do. This is not the forum to talk about that person. Indeed you're breaking the law because you are liable right now. You have no data to back up what you're saying." But I doubt very many of our

folks are going to have the guts to do it. And that could be a serious problem for all of us.

Lack of Professionalism

In Daviston, one member was greatly disturbed by the “lack of professionalism” on her council. Cathy, a parent representative, felt key council members were using inappropriate words and actions to devalue her contributions. She was frustrated by its continuation and hoped the council would eventually become more of a professional body. For as she noted, “It’s a council that’s having problems getting its professional act together and if we’re going to have this kind of decision making capability, we’ve got to get our professionalism together.”

Cathy was a town librarian with many years of experience dealing with volunteer boards. What she experienced at the Daviston council, however, was not in keeping with those experiences. Cathy explained how it differed.

I can go off to a library review committee meeting and have what I say listened to. I can present library conferences and be asked back next year. And yet what I have to say is not valued. I think it’s an education process. A lot of these people have never sat on professional boards. They sit on minor hockey boards. They sit on play school boards where there’s no professionalism about. There’s nothing from Robert’s Rules of Order to any kind of order principles. It dissolves into friction. People think that if you object to a motion, you’re objecting to the person that made the motion. You’re not. That’s totally it. They’re not capable of saying this is business. This is personal.

The result of those experiences left Cathy hesitant to speak at the council. She spoke about that hesitancy.

I’m tired of it, really tired of it. After every council, I go, “God, Cathy. This is something you should have said. Why didn’t you say it?” And I don’t know. I really don’t know why I didn’t. I don’t know if I would ever bring up a personal concern.

Cathy used two incidents, which occurred at the same meeting, to illustrate the extent of her discomfort. The first involved a large library expenditure that was being planned for the school. A librarian herself, Cathy was not consulted about the issue. She explained what happened at the meeting.

It was a combination of two things happening at the same meeting. It was the “Oh, there goes Cathy again” looks, and I thought, “I have important things to say.” But you have to have your opinion respected before you’re going to be asked. And yet my opinion is respected when I go elsewhere. Look what I’ve done for this town’s library. I’ve done a lot. But they didn’t even ask me at council. No, my opinion is not valued. I’m not a professional. I’m just an amateur, a pseudo-librarian.

Cathy continued.

I have things I can bring to council. I’ve been to three board development workshops. I know how boards work. I know Robert’s Rules of Order. But you say things like that in this council and it’s a roll of the eyes. You’re blowing your own horn. It’s not like that elsewhere. I don’t understand. Maybe it happens everywhere or maybe it’s a small town situation. But Daviston doesn’t do things by the book. Have we ever done things by the book? And that’s why I think a lot of things happen. We’re used to doing things our way. We run things the way we want in Daviston. But I don’t think we can continue that way.

The second incident involved a discussion on a board related matter. Cathy shared her memories of that incident.

Our trustee wasn’t sure how to vote on an issue regarding whether the board should purchase vehicles for the school district or continue to pay mileage on personal vehicles. He didn’t know how to vote on the issue so he brought it to us. He said, “I just want your feedback to clarify this in my mind.” I stuck up my hand, was recognized by the chair and said, “The only thing that bothers me is that whenever there is a government vehicle used, it bothers me to see that vehicle parked in a driveway. To me, that means it’s being used for personal reasons and the temptation to do that would really bother me. I like the way the provincial government has it where you check it out for a specific purpose and you take it back to the provincial parking lot. In this case, however, they would be allowed to drive it home and that bothers me. That’s showing that we’re buying somebody else’s personal vehicle.”

To me, that’s a valid opinion. It doesn’t deal much with the meat of the matter like costs or anything else. However, it does deal a lot with public perception and that’s important. But the response from a neighbouring council member, two people down, was, “That has to be the stupidest reason for not allowing this that I’ve ever heard.” Well, no it’s not a stupid reason. You cannot devalue other people’s opinions. You must listen to them no matter how harebrained they might be.

Cathy continued.

My response was, "Excuse Me? Just because it's my opinion does not make it a stupid opinion. It's only an opinion." And the response then was the chairperson interjecting and saying, "Seeing as you feel so strongly about this issue, how do you feel?" to the person who interrupted me. He did it well. Our chairperson has a major job. He's got 24 people that he's trying to keep in order. Half of them don't ask for floor time. They just barge on in and interrupt and take over the floor. But our chairperson makes a point of interrupting if someone puts up their hand. He will interrupt the big mouth that has carried on for five minutes and say, "Excuse me, I believe such and such has something to say." He is slowly teaching the rest of the council respect for other people's time.

Cathy wished other council members would recognize the strengths she brought to the Daviston council. She believed providing a formal opportunity for all members to share their areas of expertise would be helpful for the council. Cathy thought this action might also curtail the problems she was experiencing. She spoke about that hope.

It would be nice to have our chairperson go around and say, "What expertise can you bring to this council?" What speciality can you bring, what information can we access from you. And go around to every individual person and let that person say, "I am strong in this area." You wouldn't do it at one meeting, but you could say, "Listen, guys. I want everybody to bring a resume in. Just a brief one, it doesn't have to be a full job resume." When we get new board members for our library board, we ask for a letter of application and we ask for that letter to detail what expertise you can bring to your board position. It's an application process. That way you can access these people for what they've got. It's too bad in a way it wasn't like that here.

Despite her personal feelings of rejection, Cathy was beginning to see signs of hope. For as she noted,

Some of them are beginning to follow procedures. The ones who have not been involved with anything are now starting to put up their hands to be recognized by the chair. They're realizing that's the fastest way to get a word in edgewise because our chairperson is doing such a good job of interrupting the grandstanders. They know if you put up your hand, you will be recognized, even if it means cutting off the power clique.

Cathy also felt there was hope for herself, as a member of the Daviston council. She was not sure, however, if the hurt would ever go away. She spoke about that concern.

It pleases me that I actually have an opinion and that's what counts. It bothers me when my opinion is not valued by other council members but it really doesn't matter because it gives me a forum for being able to say what I mean and not have it dismissed out of hand. Just having you be willing to listen to me has helped an awful lot. I guess I just have to quit being so bullied. But it's a little intimidating to place your opinions in a group of 24 people that you know. I have no scruples about doing it with a group of 24 that I don't know. But these are people that I see day to day, that effect me on a day to day basis, that I run into in the grocery store. And I guess because I know them, those comments hurt.

Cathy continued.

I think what bothers me most is that people around here have such a low opinion of my opinions. That really bothers me but they say the last place you're recognized is at home. I can go out and hold my own with university graduates. I can give and take with the best of them. But in this town, you sit back and you're quiet and let things go on. And that's strange because the only people who come here are people who want to do things, who want to achieve. It's one of the last lands of opportunity. So it's kind of a contradiction in terms. It bothers me a lot. It bothers me a lot, actually, but I won't quit. I will not quit although I've talked about it. I've said, "Why am I on this stupid council?" Oh yeah, I've talked about it but I will not quit. I think I might even do an oration on it, just stand up one day and do the soap box thing. But for now, I'm just trying to get up the bravery to barge in against those people, to let them know I have opinions, to let them know I want to be respected.

THEME

Relations

The previous categories were derived from data gathered during the nine interview sessions. Upon further analysis of those categories, one underlying theme emerged. That theme depicted "the story behind the story" as it related to school council involvement. Whether respondents were speaking about their hopes, fears or concerns, I believe they were highlighting the crucial role that relations play in school council implementation.

I came to that conclusion when I began looking at the common threads that were weaving their way throughout the respondents' stories. Immediately I recognized a number of commonalities, including uncertainty, power and influence, trust and distrust,

and belief. As I began to think about these threads in more detail, however, I realized they were not islands unto themselves but were a part of a much larger story. It was then that I decided those threads were aspects of the main theme of relations.

Relations and the activities that accompanied its development, affected who sat on school councils, how individuals perceived their role on school council, what information was brought to council, how members interacted with each other on council, and how decisions were made. It also affected group cohesion and the respondent's perception of their own and others' level of influence on the council.

To tell this aspect of my findings, I have chosen to illustrate the theme of relations within three sub-themes. They are (a) knowledge and power, (b) trust and distrust, and (c) belief and uncertainty. In doing so, I believe it will demonstrate not only the part each played in the formation of relations in each school council, but also the very different experiences of respondents between and within the councils.

Knowledge and Power

Throughout the interviews, the concept of power emerged several times. On occasion it was stated explicitly but other times it was not so obvious, lying hidden beneath the surface of the respondents' words. Sometimes power was the source of the respondents' frustrations; sometimes it was the source of their fears. No one appeared immune to its influences and no one appeared to have cornered its influences.

The aspect of power that permeated respondents' stories was that of knowledge. For in both councils, knowledge appeared to be a prized commodity. Those that possessed it, and were recognized by others as possessing it, were seen as powerful and able to exert a great deal of influence. Conversely, those who were not perceived to be knowledgeable, or believed they did not possess knowledge, exerted very little influence or power.

The first time knowledge and power surfaced as an underlying theme was in my interview with the superintendent. He believed that the very existence of school councils was due to a power struggle between the Minister of Education and school boards. He

felt the Minister saw school boards as “blocks” and school councils as a means to limit their existing powers. Many respondents, including the superintendent, did not want to see this power struggle extend to the local school board and its school councils. Rather than adversaries, respondents hoped to find an acceptable power-sharing arrangement between the two entities.

The superintendent believed one way to do this was to help principals and school trustees become knowledgeable about the role that school councils could play in local educational efforts. He arranged meetings where those two entities, with the assistance of the local school chairs, would draft roles and regulations for school councils. An important aspect of those meetings was to define the working relationship among the three entities with respect to decision making and information sharing. According to the superintendent, the result, from the school board’s perspective, was positive. For as he stated, “That’s the board’s attitude. They weren’t afraid of them. They celebrated them . . . We’re not fighting each other. The school councils and the school board are part of the same system.”

The local board’s willingness to enter into a power-sharing arrangement was applauded by many respondents. The chair of the Daviston council acknowledged the school board had been very accommodating to school councils, in essence, “a very willing school board . . . willing to give up their traditional powers.” Politically, however, he believed it was in the school board’s best interest to do so, as he believed school councils were going to be “major players” in the future.

To promote effective relations between the school board and the Daviston council, the chair invited the school’s two school board members to sit as *de facto* members of their school council. He believed it opened an important means of communication, both to and from the school board. The superintendent also believed this new line of communication was important, for it lessened the likelihood of “gate keeping” happening at the local schools.

Gate keeping, according to the superintendent, often happened when principals decided the kinds of information that should or should not be presented to parents. He

believed that parents needed to be informed decision makers if school councils were to be successful. He did not believe that his principals always viewed parents as important parts of that decision making process. He felt this was a result of their training and lack of experience with shared decision making. One principal, who acknowledged that he and other principals often “lied” to parents, felt they did this out of fear of losing control.

The use of knowledge to exert undue influence and power was identified by the superintendent and others as an issue faced by the Daviston council. The superintendent and the principal of the Daviston school believed the large number of teachers who sat as teacher or parent representatives on the Daviston school council used their knowledge of the educational system to create undue influence. He believed their presence “intimidated parents” and that teachers were “stacking the councils” as a means to “control the principal and what’s going on in that building.”

The principal of the Daviston council was also concerned with the influence being exerted by the teachers on the school council. She believed the teachers were promoting their own individual agendas at the expense of the greater good of the school. She took an adversarial approach to those teachers and tried to find ways to circumvent their influence on council. One way she did that was to delay bringing items to the council until she was assured of the rest of the council’s support. She felt limited, however, in affecting the teachers’ influence over the lay members of the council. Because of this, she described her relationship with those individuals as tense.

The teachers on the school council did not see their relationship in the same way. They believed it was their responsibility to bring issues and information to the school council. They did this because they did not feel that the administration understood the viewpoints of students or teachers as they were often out of touch with what was happening in their classrooms. They were also concerned that lay members of the council would have difficulty understanding certain aspects of schooling. They saw their role on council as helping those individuals to become more knowledgeable.

One respondent was particularly aware that those who controlled knowledge or information on the Daviston council tended to be teachers or others of notable status in

the community. She felt those individuals often belittled the comments of people such as her, who did not have professional degrees or belong to a certain social group within the community. Because of that, she believed an adversarial relationship existed between those two groups and the rest of the council. She felt a lot could be accomplished by encouraging council members to be more respectful of those whose backgrounds or experiences were different from the majority. She also felt more needed to be done to control the subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, actions that were undermining relationships and productivity on the Daviston council.

In Willow Ridge, power and knowledge issues arose very differently. In that community, parents were “a little frightened” of public schools and were reluctant to utilize the power extended to them through school councils. The co-chair of the council noted that if she were required to exercise more decision making power, especially in financial matters, she was uncertain if she would continue in her role. She believed her fellow community members wanted to be more knowledgeable about their children’s education, but did not feel they wanted to use this knowledge to make decisions.

The principal and co-chairs respected the community’s desire to have a limited role in decision making. However, they were determined to provide parents with more knowledge about the role they could play in their children’s education. Their focus was on making the school a more inviting and less intimidating place for parents. To do this they used community events and gathering places, such as the local grocery store, to spread the word about what was happening at the school. They also provided a space at the school for parents to meet during the school day and short information sessions on different aspects of education at the monthly school council meetings. The principal and co-chairs believed that, despite the small number of parents that turned out for the school council meetings, they were beginning to build a closer relationship with their community.

Trust and Distrust

Just as knowledge and power permeated respondents’ stories, so did trust and

distrust. In both councils, it was sometimes difficult to separate trust and distrust from the issues of power and knowledge. However, it was not difficult to see how trust and distrust affected the relationships that were occurring in those two councils.

The principal of Daviston Composite was pleased that the school council and staff were able to work together on important issues for the school. She applauded the work of the school council in addressing the issue of credit-based funding. For as she noted, “the council was right behind us on this one, 100 percent of the way.” However, the principal did have concerns about bringing certain issues to the council, especially those known to be contentious among members of the teaching staff, many of whom sat on the council as teacher or parent representatives. She did not trust those people to present accurate or unbiased views to the council. She also resented the fact that they often brought issues to the council before the school’s administrative team was prepared to address them. She questioned the ethics of those individuals and believed that their actions directly affected collegial relations on the council and in the school.

The teachers, however, believed that a sense of trust permeated those relationships. The teachers felt others trusted them to present the community’s perspective on issues, though none of them were members of the under-represented segments, such as the Mennonite, native or immigrant populations. While they supported lay involvement in decision making, one teacher questioned whether parents could be trusted to make decisions that directly affected the classroom. She felt they often lacked the knowledge or background information to do so. For as she noted, “a lot of these parents don’t have a clue what’s going on. They’re well-educated people, professional people, but they have no inkling of the school system or what’s happening here.”

Both teacher respondents believed it was imperative that teachers continue to play an important role on council, even if it meant sacrificing their time on other committees. They believed the administrators did not always accurately represent the views of the staff on certain issues and they needed to be there to ensure it was. One teacher described the administrators’ sharing of information on council as “not that they were lying, but I felt that they weren’t really fairly representing the strength with which staff felt on a

certain issue.” She acknowledged that presenting an alternative view could be “a little touchy in the sense of saying something that goes counter to what the administrators are saying.” However, she felt this was “just part of human relations” and that while she had to “learn to be a little more tactful,” she was not going to back down.

One parent representative on the Daviston council was most concerned with the lack of trust displayed on the council. According to her, the most hurtful aspect of this was that the people who caused her the most grief were people she knew on an informal basis, people she felt she could trust. They lived and worked in the same community. She saw them on a daily basis in the grocery store, the drug store, or other venues in the town. Nevertheless, even more importantly, she knew they were aware of the experiences she brought to the council and yet, would not extend her the same courtesy or respect as extended to fellow “social elite” members.

The principal’s story from Willow Ridge also demonstrated the role that trust and distrust played in establishing or maintaining relationships. He admitted that at times he could be “dominating” and sway parents in any direction he wanted. He also noted that in the past, professional educators such as himself never listened to parents and often “lied to them” about issues. However, he no longer felt the need to do so. He trusted parents to act in the best interests of their children and “with experience” felt they would make informed decisions. He felt a “trusting” relationship was being established between himself and other members of the council and was excited about the future. For as he acknowledged, “I know they don’t have the expertise . . . as they get more experience, get more involved in the process, it will change. But I’m comfortable with it right now. I think it’s a two-way street.”

The co-chairs also felt a trusting relationship developing between themselves and the school principal. They believed this was because the principal took time to share information with the council and help them become more knowledgeable. They felt sharing this knowledge with the fellow community members was important to help alleviate some of the Metis community’s distrust of the public education system. They also believed that structuring the school council in ways that might be less intimidating

for community members was important.

Belief and Uncertainty

Just as knowledge and power, trust and distrust appeared to wind their way throughout the respondents' stories, so did belief and uncertainty. Similar to the previous sub-themes, belief and uncertainty were embedded within the storyline of relations. Respondents' belief in the concept of school councils created an environment where parents, principals, teachers and the district superintendent were beginning to speak the dialogue of shared decision making. However, uncertainty regarding how to operationalize that concept was evident. Rather than bringing stakeholders closer together in helping to make decisions or solve problems, uncertainty seemed to push some individuals further apart.

Respondents such as the superintendent and the council chairs were adamant that school councils were viable institutions and that parents could be trusted to make good decisions. Other respondents such as the teachers and principals were cautiously optimistic, believing parents needed more knowledge and assistance to make them informed decision-makers. Despite these cautions, all respondents shared a willingness to be involved in the concept well before the province mandated its existence. That willingness was based on a hope that school councils could positively affect the way that education was perceived and delivered in the Kettle Creek School District.

Many stories demonstrated the role that belief played in sustaining members' involvement with the concept. The co-chair of the Willow Ridge school council acknowledged her own fear of public speaking, her lack of knowledge of the public school system, and her fear that others would criticize her decision making. Nevertheless, that did not stand in her way of participation on the council. In fact, while these same fears limited other community members' involvement in the school council, she accepted a leadership role on it. She persevered because she said it gave her a chance to be involved in decisions that would affect her community's children. For as she told her daughter, "It's for you. It's not for me. It's for you."

Another story also demonstrated a strong belief in the concept of school councils. A non-teaching parent representative on the Daviston council endured much heartache in her efforts to be a contributing member of her council. She did so because she believed she could make a difference for the students, something that was especially important to her given her daughter's treatment while at the school. Perhaps that belief was most soundly echoed in her commitment to the concept. For as she acknowledged, despite the belittling and disrespectful attitude of some of her colleagues on the council, she did not intend to quit.

I will not quit although I've talked about it. I've said, "Why am I on this stupid council?". . . But for now, I'm just trying to get up the bravery to barge in against those people, to let them know I have opinions, to let them know I want to be respected.

The principal of the Willow Ridge school also believed in the concept. He did so despite what he called years of "adverse programming," where principals were encouraged to withhold truth from parents and actively work to discourage their involvement in decision making. He feared the "old trustee model" where one individual tried to control the work of professionals in the school. He also was aware of his own tendencies to dominate discussions and to be seen as intimidating to those who were not as familiar with public education.

Despite those patterns, he now found himself committed to creating an environment where parents would be an important part of the decision making process. He appeared willing to live with the ambiguity that surrounded that process, including his community's reluctance to be involved in public education. He encouraged forums that were safe places where community members could come to listen, ask questions, or speak to school issues. He and his council also tried to reinforce his community's values, trying to spread the concept of professional community beyond the doors of the school and into places where the community liked to gather.

The principal of Daviston Composite appeared interested in extending a similar idea of professional community. However, her uncertainty in doing so was not based on

preserving power relationships within the school and its community, but within the school itself. For it appeared the principal was concerned that the teachers on the council were usurping the administrative team's power to present their own discordant views of the school. The superintendent supported that view, believing that limiting the number of teachers who sit on school councils may be necessary. However, he was also aware of the inherent difficulties in doing so.

For many respondents, the uncertainty that clouded their belief took on aspects of many different concerns. Some wondered whether school councils would ever become more than "just a sounding board," "places to get policies delivered," "mini school boards," or havens for "special interest groups". Others questioned whether parents or teachers would have the time or interest to devote to school councils. Others wondered if sitting on the council was an exercise in frustration, as the province would say, in five years time, "Lets go back to the old system." Still others wondered if the lack of definitive guidelines from the province regarding "where the power rests" would sound the death knell for the innovation. For as one respondent noted, if the government were not going to clearly delineate responsibility and accountability guidelines, she and others may not continue.

It's not that I am power hungry or anything, but I just don't want to waste my time. If I'm going to these meetings and I'm helping making decisions but these decisions don't carry any meat, then there's no sense in doing it. I know very well that the parents on there feel exactly the same way. Several of them have voiced it and parents are saying, "Where do we go from here? What are we really doing? Are we just creating a reason to meet sometimes?"

Whether she would continue or not, is unknown. What is known, however, is that all respondents experienced first-hand the difficulty of creating a community of decision makers. Some were more involved than others in promoting activities to support the concept. Others appeared more embroiled in activities that encouraged self-interest while discouraging or resisting commonality, collegiality and cooperation. In the following and final chapter, I discuss those ideas within the realm of insights from the literature and the study. Recommendations and implications for research and practice are also presented.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter provides a summary of the study's purpose, research methodology and findings. In addition, it includes reflections from the literature and implications for practice and future research. The recommendations and implications are discussed within the context of an emerging conceptual framework incorporating relationship building strategies for school councils and ideas on how future research and practice in school councils might be focused.

Summary of the Study

Purpose of the Study

My purpose in studying two school councils in the Kettle Creek School District was to understand the experiences and perceptions of those involved in its early implementation efforts. In doing so, I wanted to understand the problems, prospects, pitfalls and prerequisites for success faced by members of those councils. I also wanted to understand the respondents' beliefs about school councils and their role in its successful implementation. The following questions served as guides to the development of the study and its subsequent analysis.

*What is the reality of school council participation for parents, teachers and principals in Willow Ridge and Daviston Composite schools?
How does this reality compare with past research?*

*What enabling or limiting factors of participation are identified by the respondents in these two sites?
How do respondents deal with those factors?*

*What, if any, changes in influence relationships occurred for respondents in this study?
How are those changes, or lack of changes, explained?*

Methodology

Interpretivism was the paradigm of choice for this qualitative study involving

school council members' understanding of participation. Participants in the study were selected based upon their current role with the council and their willingness to be involved. A total of nine people participated in the study, including five parents (one chair, two co-chairs and two parent representatives), the principals of both schools, one teacher representative and the district superintendent. In preparation for obtaining participant consent, each potential candidate was informed of the intent of the study, the intended means of data gathering, guaranteed anonymity of source in all data reporting, as well as advised of their right of withdrawal. Having secured consent from each participant, interview sessions were then arranged.

The intent of the interview sessions was to give participants an opportunity to reflect upon their personal experiences as members of a school council or as individuals responsible for its implementation. In each case, a semi-structured, audio-taped interview ranging in length from one to two hours was the method used to gather information. As the researcher, I also maintained a field journal in which I recorded my thoughts and insights. This field journal became especially important as the data from one interview was partially lost due to a tape recorder malfunction. The field notes provided an opportunity to revisit those insights at a later date.

The interview data were transcribed and returned to the participants for confirmation of intended meaning. Following this, I did a content analysis of the data from which categories and a theme reflecting the study's major questions emerged. I then returned a summary of the theme and the findings that emerged from it to 4 of the 9 participants who volunteered to review and assess my interpretations of the data.

The Two Sites

When I began the process of selecting two sites for this study, I was drawn to the apparent distinctiveness of the Daviston and Willow Ridge communities. However, there were also similarities between the two communities. Both appeared to consist of diverse interest groups, fragmented by differences which included social class, ethnicity, and knowledge or comfort with the public education system. As the study progressed, I came

to realize how important those similarities were to my findings.

Daviston. The center of activity in a large rural area, Daviston attracts people from a variety of backgrounds, many of whom come to take advantage of the area's abundant natural resources. Its population tends to be young and transient. According to one respondent, Daviston is a "cultural clash" of people looking for a brighter future. Among its cultural mixes are white (blue collar and professional), aboriginal (Treaty and Metis), Mennonite, and immigrant peoples (Turkish, East Indian and Egyptian). According to recent government reports, Daviston has a high rate of illiteracy with 38.5% of the population having less than a grade nine education; a figure 3.5 times higher than the provincial average.

Daviston Composite serves 400 students in grades 5-12. Its student population is a microcosm of the greater community with a mix of white, immigrant, native and Mennonite students. The school council, however, is not. Over half its 21 members are teachers, spouses of teachers or employed by the school board. There is limited representation from the rural population. Only two members represent the immigrant, native or Mennonite populations. The school council has identified under-representation as a major issue but has not found ways to address it. The superintendent is aware of that issue and believes limiting the number of school employees on the council may be necessary. However, he is also aware that doing so may be politically unwise.

Willow Ridge. Comprised of mainly Metis people, this community is also home to a few treaty, Mennonite and "professional families" who tend to work for organizations such as the RCMP or the school system. There is a high rate of unemployment in the community, with most of its population having less than a grade 9 education. In fact, less than 10% of the population has a grade 12 education. Many of its residents have negative feelings about education as distant but painful memories of residential schooling remain. According to Willow Ridge's principal, community members feel they have to protect their children from the school system. Sitting on the school council is seen as one way of doing this, however, few choose that option.

Willow Ridge Elementary is a K-6 school with a population of 130 students. It

was often in danger of not having enough members to form a school council. The few individuals who did participate were actively recruited by the principal and the two co-chairs. One co-chair, a Metis woman, believed fear was the basis of their membership problem. She identified fear of public speaking, lack of knowledge of the education system, fear of criticism from fellow community members for decisions made by the parent group and an overall fear of schools as issues that limited her community's involvement. The principal and co-chairs of the council were aware of the problem but felt limited in what they could do to change their community's perceptions.

Major Findings

What I discovered was that the reality of participation for school councils members differed greatly. Those differences appeared to be related to an individual's comfort and knowledge of the education system, as well as their professional status (or lack of it). I discovered that school councils did not represent a large portion of the ethnic and lower socio-economic segments of their communities. I also discovered that many school council members were frustrated by the uncertainty of their role, especially as it related to the scope of their responsibilities.

Despite those concerns, respondents supported the concept of school councils and believed the district and school board were committed to seeing its successful implementation in the Kettle Creek School District. However, traditional approaches to parent and community involvement in decision making appeared to predominate in the two sites, with parent and community members playing, at best, a supporting role to the system's professionals.

The major theme that emerged from the study was relations. Knowledge and power, trust and distrust, and belief and uncertainty were identified as sub-themes of relations. As I reflected on those understandings, I realized they spoke indirectly about bridging the relational gaps that exist in today's schools. In particular, they provided me with insight into how schools did (or did not) bridge the relational gaps between (a) the school and its community, (b) professionals and parents, and (c) roles and expectations

for school council members. Those findings and the literature that supports them are the focus of this chapter.

Reflections in Relation to the Literature and the Study

Bridging the Relational Gap Between Schools and Their Communities

Willow Ridge and Daviston Composite school councils were both capacity-building entities (Fullan and Quinn, 1996). Fullan and Quinn described such entities as committed to bridging the relational gaps that exist between communities and schools. However, I believe Willow Ridge and Daviston Composite were hindered in doing so by several issues. One of the most pervasive issues that faced both school councils was that of community under-representation.

Defining Under-Representation. On the surface, it appeared that Willow Ridge was the only council that had membership problems. The principal and co-chairs often spoke of the difficulty they had in attracting members from their community to sit on the council. Whether it was the present school council, or its predecessor, the parent council, they were often in danger of not having the seven members needed to form a council. In Daviston, however, it was a different story. That community far surpassed the minimum number of parents needed to form a council. In fact, it boasted a school council of 21 members, much larger than any other council in the district.

However, both councils and their communities suffered from under-representation. In Willow Ridge, given the small number of community members who attended the council, the school's two professional representatives and its non-native co-chair often outnumbered the Metis members on the council. In Daviston, despite its size, under-representation referred to the specific segments of the community that were not represented on the council. They included the rural, Mennonite, immigrant and native populations. The social elite, a name given by one respondent to the community's influential members, dominated membership and deliberations on the council. Besides their perceived social status, most of Daviston's council was also very familiar with the

education system, being school board employees or closely related to someone who worked for the district.

Insights from the Research. According to the literature, non-representative parental involvement is not unusual in schools. Epstein (1995), Laureau (1987) and Goldring (1990) found that parents from middle-class social settings tended to be very involved and supportive of schools, while lower-class parents were less involved and less supportive. Thomas (1986) noted that white, middle class people remained most likely to take up voluntary positions in local groups while Croft and Beresford (1993) concluded that most participatory schemes have mirrored rather than challenged existing disadvantages or discriminations. These findings appeared to mirror the existing conditions in both Willow Ridge and Daviston councils. However, underlying the issue of under-representation is the question of whether or not school councils are intended to reflect the various segments of their communities.

The 1994 amendments to the School Act stated that the majority of members of a school council shall be parents of students enrolled in the school. It did not address the issue of representation and whether members were intended to reflect a democratic representation of their community. Nor did it address the question of who parents were to represent—the general community, a specific part of that community, or their own child's interests. In this study, respondents believed they represented their community, which they saw as a unified entity, and their own child's interests.

My only other experience with the question of community and school councils involved data I collected for Alberta Education's Position Paper on school councils. A large number of responses indicated that stakeholders were concerned that special interest groups in their communities might dominate membership on school councils. Few described what they meant by special interest groups, but those that did frequently referred to religious or "back to the basics" groups. Many felt that this had the potential to advance the causes of the vocal minority, while silencing the views of the majority. I do not recall, however, any comments concerned with the voices of a community's minority being silenced by those of the majority.

The Myth of Community. In Daviston, the views of the majority appeared to dominate the school council. The majority of its members tended to be white, middle-class, well-educated professional or business people who lived within the town's boundaries. They were all well-known in the community, being involved in many other organizations or service groups. They were also very familiar with the culture of schooling, including its language and customs. Those that may not have been as familiar, including the immigrant, native or Mennonite people, were noticeably absent.

In Willow Ridge, those that were most unfamiliar with the school system were also absent from its school council. However, the two school councils differed greatly in their attempts to reach their absent community members. Perhaps, it was those attempts that defined, not only the school council's comfort with the issue of under-representation, but also their definition or understanding of community.

Many times in the interview process respondents in both Willow Ridge and Daviston referred to "the community" and its beliefs. In Willow Ridge, where the majority of community members shared the same ethnicity, social class and experiences of schooling, the respondents used similar words and descriptions to describe their community and its members' beliefs. They did this despite the fact that only one respondent shared the same characteristics as the broader community. Perhaps being a part of an obvious minority made it easier for these individuals to identify the segments of their community that they wanted or needed to reach.

In Daviston, respondents also referred to their community, however, they seldom referred to the native, Mennonite or immigrant segments of their community. When they referred to their community, it appeared as if they were referring to a community united in heritage, economic status, knowledge of and comfort with schooling. However, this was not the case and it was those most unlike the members of the school council that were not present. Perhaps it was, as Young (1990) noted, that "the myth of community" was operating in Daviston. Young believed this myth often produced defensive exclusionary pressures to exclude those who did not share the same values and beliefs as the powerful actors within the community.

If so, the task of convincing members of the excluded groups to join the school council in Daviston may, in fact, have been a larger and more difficult task than that facing the Willow Ridge council. For it may be that looking inward, and examining your own exclusionary practices, is more difficult than looking outward and focusing upon the actions of others. And while both councils recognized there were distinct segments of their community that were not represented, the two school councils appeared to approach that fact in different ways. In Willow Ridge, they appeared to be *reaching out*. In Daviston, *reaching in* appeared to be the focus.

Reaching Out. In Willow Ridge, convincing the Metis population that their membership was beneficial to them and the school council was a high priority for both the two co-chairs and the principal. However, they also acknowledged that it was a formidable task, as they were fighting to overcome years of adverse schooling that had alienated the Metis people from formal involvement in their children's schooling. Johnson (1987) attested to such difficulty, noting that individual perceptions are highly shaped by social and organizational experiences as well as cultural heritage. Johnson's analysis of cultural and organizational change would lead one to believe that the likelihood of changing this community's perceptions of schooling is both problematic and difficult. For as he noted, "perceptions shape human attitudes and behavior; their impact is pervasive and unavoidable" (p. 206).

Despite the difficulty, I believe the principal and co-chairs were determined to bridge the relational gap between their school and the community. To do this, they focused upon communication, openness and trust. They took small, incremental steps that were intended to begin the process. The principal and co-chairs began dialoguing in the community, sharing stories and school council happenings with the general public. They did this away from the school—in the grocery store, the arena or anywhere else that people gathered. They did this because they felt it was important to bring the school to the parents, rather than expecting their parents to come to the school for this information.

And for those few parents who did come to the school, either to pick up their children after school, or to drop in as observers to the school council, they were provided

with an openness intended to send an important message. That message was that the school wanted them there and would try to create an environment that was nonthreatening and reflective of their own culture. Classrooms were open to parents, with teachers encouraged to invite parents into their rooms when they noticed them in the hallways. A room was also set aside for parents, so that they might have a place to gather and talk among themselves. School council meetings also took on a very informal approach, with discussions open to all present and no motions entertained or voted upon. A show of hands or a nod of heads confirmed the group's intentions. The council also tried to provide short information sessions on curricular or budget topics, so that parents would feel informed, but not overwhelmed by the information. For the most part, however, council deliberations tended to focus on social events and fundraising, aspects of the education process that parents said they were most interested in.

Reaching In. The ingrained culture in Daviston appeared to be that members of the social elite joined the school council. Because of this, changing the school council to a more democratically represented institution would require considerable work on the behalf of the school and its council. Convincing more parents that their participation was not only wanted but central to the collective success of children would be an important part of that process. And, according to the respondents from Daviston, that was their goal. However, it appeared that many of the council's actions were reaching in, rather than out to their community's silent minorities.

The Daviston council was doing many of the same things as the Willow Ridge council to attract interest in their community. They advertised the local school council meetings and elections, had current school council members solicit parents to sit on the council, tried to spread the word of the council's work informally throughout the community and provided nonmembers with observer status at their monthly meetings. However, who they talked with and how they conducted their meetings may provide an insight into why they were not more successful in encouraging members from outside the social elite to join the school council.

When respondents talked about encouraging more members from different

segments of their community, they most often referred to parents who lived outside the town limits. Very few references were made about encouraging parents from the native, Mennonite or immigrant segments of the community to join the school council. One respondent talked about encouraging “the do-ers” of the community, the people who were known to be active in the community and could “make things happen” to be members of the council. She felt she had been successful, as many of them agreed to stand for election. When the council decided to accept all nominations, rather than hold elections, they became members of the council.

What remains to be answered, however, is how open and inviting the school council appeared to people outside the realm of the social elite. The formality of the council, from its committee structure to its strict adherence to prescribed operating procedures, may have inadvertently created an uninviting environment for the very members of the community they were seeking—those with the least experience in formal organizations. The curricular focus and formal language of the meetings may also have deterred those with less education or experience of schools. The chair, a well-educated man, noted that he was often unfamiliar with the council’s discourse, having been educated in Great Britain. However, he felt that asking questions when he was unsure provided the necessary information.

It is questionable, however, whether others with less education or knowledge of the system would have the same sense of security to ask questions among people who appeared to have a good knowledge of the educational system. One member of the school council, self-described as a nonmember of the social elite, said she felt ridiculed when she asked questions. She described people rolling their eyes and making snide comments when she asked questions or sought clarification on items. She felt that others who were also not members of the social elite, experienced similar humiliation. And, while her colleagues preferred to remain quiet, rather than face the humiliation, she was determined to persevere.

It is stories such as this, despite their singularity, that question whether the council was focused on reaching out or reaching in. Reaching out, as in the Willow

Ridge council, meant that all individual input would be sought, regardless of whether they reflected the views of the minority or majority. Reaching out meant that the council would tailor its operating procedures to address those segments of the community that may not have been familiar with the language and operation of schools. Informal information sessions and open meetings where observers were encouraged to contribute were part of that culture.

However, the current operations and procedures of the Daviston council likely ensured that those who were most familiar with the language and operations of schools or other formal organizations continued to serve and be heard on the council. Those individuals included teachers, other school district employees and influential members of the community. The council, despite its attempt to reach out and bridge the relational gap between the school and its community, appeared to be reaching in. In doing so, it failed to recognize the very actions that supported sameness and discouraged a more representative view of their community.

Bridging the Relational Gap Between Professionals and Parents

In Alberta, and many other places in the world, a major focus of educational policy has been to transform the influence relationship between schools and parents. Much of this legislation gives primacy to the notion of parental voice (Munn, 1998) which emphasizes the collective rights of parents and others in the general welfare of the school system. Sarason (1995) explained the rationale for this world wide change as the political principle. For as he noted, “when you are going to be affected, directly or indirectly, by a decision, you should stand in *some* relationship to the decision-making process” (p. 7).

According to Covey (1989), trust, or the lack of it, is at the root of success or failure in relationships and in the bottom line results of business, industry, education and government. He also believed in order to extend influence to parents, professionals need to overcome feelings of mistrust, loss of power, and entrenched notions of professional-lay roles in educational decision making. In order for this to happen, at least one person

must assume responsibility for leading the change. In the Kettle Creek School District, that person was the superintendent.

Promoting Change

The respondents noted that the superintendent's active support for the concept, including sponsorship of workshops for various stakeholder groups, gave credibility to the innovation. His support also served to address a fundamental problem associated with implementing change in influence relationships. And that, according to Fullan (1993, p. 3), is the conservative nature of educational organizations.

On one hand we have the constant and expanding presence of educational innovation and reform. It is no exaggeration to say that dealing with change is endemic to post-modern society. On the other hand, however, we have an educational system that is fundamentally conservative. The way that teachers are trained, the way that schools are organized, the way that the educational hierarchy operates, and the way that education is treated by political decision-makers results in a system that is more likely to retain the status quo than to change. When change is attempted under such circumstances, it results in defensiveness, superficiality or at best short-lived pockets of success.

To ensure the growth of the innovation and to overcome his district's traditional views of power and influence, the superintendent focused on developing trusting relations between principals, trustees and parents. The superintendent noted that previous experiences in a province that strongly supported parental involvement in decision making provided him with the confidence and knowledge to pursue this goal. To change entrenched beliefs, he believed that directing his efforts toward principals and trustees was necessary. This may have been a recognition of those individuals' belief in the finite notion of power within an organization, or as Sarason (1995) called it, "the zero-sum game—what *they* win, *we* lose."

If that is the case, the superintendent was directing his efforts at those who might have believed they had the most to lose in any redistribution of power. For as many respondents noted, the district's principals and school board had been fulfilling very traditional roles prior to the implementation of school councils; roles that included very

little parental voice in decision making at the school or district level. The superintendent believed he was ready to confront any opposition to the redistribution of power in the district. This was important, for as Pfeffer (1992) noted, problems in implementation are often “problems in developing political will and expertise—the desire to accomplish something, even against opposition, and the knowledge and skills to make it possible to do so.”

The superintendent encouraged the school board and its principals to accept the new councils as allies in the political arena, supporting rather than detracting from the jobs they were doing. He encouraged the trustees and the principals to recognize the benefit of extending local decision making to parents, including bringing additional sources of knowledge to bear when making decisions. Moorman and Egermeier (1992) supported such efforts, noting internal constraints or contradictions to restructuring must be addressed if reform efforts are to be successful. They believed that the tension between innovation and legitimacy, often the product of conformance with deep social myths, were synonymous with restructuring efforts. Rather than trading one off against the other, they believed restructuring required “the development of a new sense of purpose and shared commitment” (p. 44).

Preparing principals to accept parental input into decision making was identified by the superintendent as one of his greatest challenges. He felt his principals had little formal training in this regard, with many coming from an era where the power of the principal was unchallenged. Sarason (1995) supported this assumption, noting that today’s educators are often unprepared for challenges to their power and its exercise, especially as it relates to how schools and classrooms are structured or run. Sarason also noted that the preparation of educators was “woefully deficient in regard to the theories and history of power, its uses and allocation, moral dilemmas, and, perhaps most fateful, the predictable psychological consequences in those who are in relationships of unequal power” (p. 21).

To counter these effects, the superintendent was prepared to be firm with his principals, forcing them to leave the comfort of their familiar ways of decision making.

However, he was concerned that his strong beliefs might preclude principals from realizing the benefits of parental involvement, seeing it as something imposed on them by the superintendent. Because of this, the superintendent hired an outside consultant to lead discussions between various stakeholder groups on the appropriate roles and responsibilities for school councils. According to the two principals in the study, the superintendent's efforts were not only acceptable, but appreciated by them. For they also felt a steady but firm hand was necessary to guide school council implementation to a successful beginning.

The superintendent trusted parents to act in the best interests of their schools and saw them as important assets in the decision making process. However, he also recognized a potential problem associated with extending decision making authority. That problem involved the insular nature of the Daviston council, which included many school district employees, including teachers, who were sitting as parent representatives on the councils. The superintendent felt these individuals viewed school councils as a threat and were attempting to maintain control over decision making by monopolizing positions on the Daviston council.

The superintendent was reluctant to suggest policy that would reduce the number of district employees on a council. He did so because he recognized the right of all parents to stand for election, regardless of their occupation. The result of his unwillingness to act, however, meant that the principal and other members of the Daviston council were left to deal with situations that arose from the unequal influence of these members.

Protecting Professional Influence

Despite the best intentions of the superintendent, when I focused upon the words and actions of those who were central to the intended influence change—the parents, I noticed that very little had changed in the district. Certainly, the emotional connectedness between parents and the school staff improved in one school. In another, a group of parents were exerting greater influence than before. However, my findings

indicated that, overall, parents were still very much on the periphery of decision making. And, it appeared that some remained on the periphery because of their own choice, while others remained there because of the influence of professionals.

Those findings supported Malen and Ogawa's (1992) extensive review of the literature on site-based management that revealed rarely does restructuring alter the existing influence relationships found in school settings. For despite the opportunity to be more involved in school wide decision making, they noted the conventional and dominant pattern where principals control building policies and procedures, teachers deliver instruction, and parents provide support was not disturbed.

Malen and Ogawa's (1992) research identified four dominant patterns to explain why the relative influence of decision making participants remained unchallenged or unchanged. They noted that (a) site participants rarely address central, salient policy issues; (b) teachers do not exert meaningful influence because principals use a variety of means to protect their managerial prerogatives; (c) parents do not challenge the professional-patron dynamic, allowing professionals to control council meetings; and, (d) councils serve as maintenance vehicles, giving principals a place to regulate conflict and generate appreciation for the complex world of the professional while involving council members in activities that garner greater public support for the school.

Those patterns appeared to be in existence in the two school councils I studied. In Willow Ridge, parents did not appear interested in changing the existing influence relationship in their school. They still harboured great distrust of schooling and were reluctant to exert influence, even when encouraged to do so. Respondents also indicated a lack of knowledge about how schools work, and expressed confidence in the school's professionals to make the appropriate decisions in those areas.

In Daviston, the "social elite" challenged the status quo, demanding a greater say in decision making. However, many of the social elite were teachers acting in the capacity of parent representatives. Parents who were neither employees of the school board nor members of the social elite were not challenging the existing patterns of influence. Whether they intended to or not, those with the most knowledge and

experience of schools, the professionals, continued to wield the most influence.

The Principals. According to Crow (1998), leadership for collaboration, far from being a peaceful, typically rational process, is full of discomfort, ambiguity and uncertainty for school administrators. Bredeson (1993), in a study of school administrators' experiences in restructured schools, noted those individuals often experienced feelings of loss of control, role uncertainty, and fear of failure. He believed those occurred because principals were required to share leadership with individuals and organizations outside the typical boundaries of the school.

The two principals in this study were aware of the superintendent's strong commitment to the concept of school councils. Nevertheless, they were concerned with the amount of change occurring in their district. Specifically, they were concerned with the large degree of uncertainty surrounding the role of parents in the new power sharing arrangement; whether parents would be knowledgeable enough to make decisions about day-to-day activities or larger issues such as curriculum, budgets or staffing; and, that special interest groups with narrow agendas could make decisions that were not in the best interests of the student body. As a result of the changes that were occurring in the district, the principals felt their role was becoming more political and further removed from instructional leadership.

According to Louis and Kruse (1995), fragmented and politicized environments, often the result of changes in decision making influence, make the development of community among adults difficult, in part because outsiders may be viewed as potential sources of problems for the school. Malen and Ogawa's (1992) research noted that principals and other professionals try to maintain traditional influence relationships in schools by using controlling mechanisms such as agenda setting and dominating conversations. In Willow Ridge, where the council served primarily as a public relations tool for the school, the agenda was a shared responsibility of the principal and the co-chairs. By the members' choice, it tended to focus on issues related to fundraising and special events. Even in those areas, however, parents deferred to the principal and other professionals.

By his own acknowledgment, the Willow Ridge principal noted that he could be too controlling at times. In the past, he had used whatever means were available to control parental influence. He believed that was the result of his own fears of lay involvement, as well as a lack of understanding on how to extend decision making to lay individuals. The words of one co-chair, while not intending to be negative, provided an insight into the effects of such controlling aspects. For as she noted, “parents like to have input, but they seem to be intimidated very easily and tend to back down and sort of remain quiet instead of approaching adversaries.”

According to St. John, Griffith and Allen-Haynes (1997), such controlling behaviors are common in parent-school organizations. They found that both principals and teachers had a difficult time listening to parents, often cutting them off in mid-sentence. According to the researchers, the effects of these actions were to alienate parents further while denying them a voice in solving the school’s problems. They suggested administrators and teachers recognize these tendencies and work at listening without being defensive or needing to have their voices dominate as the voices of authority.

In Daviston, the principal did not control the agenda or dominate conversations. The agenda was set by the chair with input from the administration. Teachers, rather than administrators, dominated discussions on the council. To limit the influence of fellow professionals on the council, the principal resorted to delaying discussion of important issues until she was assured of the council’s support. And while it is not known how often this strategy was used, it is known that teachers were unwilling partners for they often provided the council with such information prior to the principal’s formal announcements.

Despite their sometimes controlling actions, I believe both principals were willing to enter a new, if limited, power sharing arrangement with parents. That is important, for as Levine and Eubanks (1992) acknowledged, “administrative resistance can create crippling obstacles because success in improving schools through empowerment still depends—as does any other reform effort—on outstanding leadership and supportive

management" (p. 66). The principals' concern, however, about parents' lack of knowledge of the educational system provided a cautionary overtone to their efforts.

Given their commitment to change, I believe more telling than their concern over lay knowledge was the feeling that a lack of trust existed within their council or community. In Daviston, it was teachers not trusting their principal to provide a space for them to become involved in the decision making process. In Willow Ridge, it was parents not fully trusting a school system of which the principal was but one representative.

Other Professionals. The social elite, the influential group of people who dominated membership on the Daviston council, included many teachers and school district employees. Others called them dominating, intimidating and focused upon their own self-interests. However, they saw their own actions as benefitting the greater good of the school. They believed it was their responsibility to be influential because they believed their presence helped to balance the interests of teachers and administration, which they saw as being very different. And, unlike Malen and Ogawa's (1992) research, they did not defer to the principal, exerting their own influence in an area that had previously been considered the domain of school administrators. They did so by sharing new information with the council, dominating discussions and actively promoting courses of action for the council. This is consistent with Pfeffer's (1992) belief that innovation almost invariably threatens the status quo and consequently is an inherently political activity.

Pounder (1998), when reflecting upon relationships in organizations, noted that members in collaborative work groups often engage in controlling behaviors because they may not trust the intentions, competence or motivations of other members. She believed such behaviors may also reflect members' general lack of commitment to a collaborative model of interaction. The actions of the social elite, despite the rhetoric of wanting the best for their school, do not suggest they were interested in establishing an environment where collaboration and shared influence would be the operative conditions.

Role theory helps to understand the protective behaviors of the social elite. It

describes roles as a defining feature of one's identity. Roles are said to powerfully shape people's beliefs about what is acceptable, appropriate, desirable and *professional* behavior (Hart, 1998). Through implicit and explicit means, it appeared the social elite were playing out roles that were well-established within their community. In that community, they exerted tremendous influence in a number of areas, with the school council but one aspect of that community.

To change their role on school council may have involved changing the nature of their roles throughout the community. That is unlikely, given the variety and importance of the roles they played. However, not to redistribute power on the school council, or to enable stakeholders other than professionals to have a voice, could be troublesome (Vincent, 1996). For as Lewington and Orpwood (1993) noted, all too often restructuring efforts become more like shuffling the proverbial deck chairs on a ship than what they were intended to become.

Lack of influence was not expressed as a concern in Willow Ridge. However, it is important to note that no "outsiders" were seeking to exert influence in areas traditionally reserved for the principal. In that council, the parents deferred to the principal, offering little if any challenge to his decision making prerogatives. The teachers' representative, while not interviewed, was described by the principal as an integral component of the council, suggesting she was acting in a supporting, rather than adversarial role as in the Daviston council. Had there been challenges, however, it is likely that others may have also wanted to exert or protect areas of professional influence.

Emerging Parental Influence

Much of the current home-school literature acknowledges the imbalance in power which structures relationships between parents, especially working class parents, and education professionals (e.g., Pounder, 1998; Vincent, 1996; Delhi & Januario, 1994). Vincent (1996) believed this inequality stemmed from the discrepancy between the professional knowledge of teachers and anyone who does not work in, and has limited access to those spheres. According to Vincent, the discrepancy in influence for working

class or ethnic minority parents is further compounded by a “dislocation between the cultural framework of their own lives and that of the school” (p. 3).

Two parents who were not teachers, but who appeared to have influence, were the chair of the Daviston council and one of the two co-chairs from Willow Ridge. However, their degree of influence appeared to differ. Downer (1997), in her study of Ontario parent advisory councils, provided insight into the roles and types of influence that nonprofessionals play on school councils. She identified executors, friends, educators, informants, critics and advisors as those roles.

Friend and informant portrayed the involvement of the Willow Ridge co-chair. Downer (1997) described friend as a member who supported the leader by responding to questions and providing information on issues to shelter him or her from potential negative criticism. The friend also pleased the principal by supporting his decisions. Downer described an informant as someone who relays information to and from the school to the greater community. The Willow Ridge co-chair noted she gladly fulfilled such duties, and felt a sense of trust developing between herself and the principal. She believed the principal was very supportive of the council members, especially those with little formal knowledge of education. In particular, his brief sessions to enlighten the council about public education were seen by the council as very worthwhile.

The Daviston chair also fulfilled the roles of friend and informant, however, he appeared to have more influence than the Willow Ridge co-chair and also took on the role of the executor. Downer (1997) described that role as defining the mandate of the council, rules governing its operation and structure, and setting the council’s agenda. In addition to this, the Daviston chair was also politically active, taking the initiative to invite the local trustees to sit on the council and pursuing his council’s membership in district and provincial alliances. Respondents described him as a knowledgeable and fair man who was committed to running the council in a democratic, effective and efficient manner.

The Daviston chair was also beginning to assume the role of critic or educator (Downer, 1997). Critic was described by Downer as one who keeps a watchful eye to

prevent the principal from making errors of judgement. Educator was described as someone who instructs staff members and members of the school board on issues related to communication, efficient management of the institution, staffing programs and finances. Because he saw himself somewhat deficient in his knowledge of the Canadian educational system, having been educated in Great Britain, he was somewhat reluctant to take on some of those roles. However, he believed they were well within the realm of possibilities for him or any other parent who took an active interest in their child's education.

Fighting for Recognition

Sarason (1995) noted that nothing blinds a person to perceiving and utilizing the assets of others than to view them in terms of labels and power status, a view he saw as most efficiently imparted in professional training and even more efficiently reinforced by the hierarchical structure of school systems. He believed discord in restructuring efforts is often created by the ways in which individuals define each other within the educational hierarchy. That belief is often predicated on a perception of the other person's assets and deficits, which are often based on status and position, as well as inaccurate perceptions of knowledge and ability. According to Sarason, unless those perceptions change and parents are perceived as assets rather than deficits to the decision making process, the role and influence of parents will continue to be limited and under-utilized.

I believe that statement reflected the reality of participation for the non-influential respondents in this study. Despite the rhetoric of change, there were two respondents who appeared unable or unwilling to exert influence. They were one co-chair of the Willow Ridge council and one parent representative from the Daviston council. Both limited their involvement on council, one by choice and one out of feelings of frustration and alienation. Pounder (1998) described their inactivity as typical of "shirking members" or members who offered little input or support for group activities. She believed shirking members engage in such behaviors due to lack of trust or lack of commitment to change. Both controlling and shirking behaviors were seen by Pounder as

threatening the survival and effectiveness of the working group.

I do not believe, however, that the actions of these two individuals threatened the survival of their respective school councils. Nevertheless, I do believe they threatened their own future involvement on school council. The co-chair, not unlike her fellow Metis members of council, took few opportunities to influence council proceedings. She preferred to listen, rather than talk during council proceedings. Due to work commitments, she was often unable to be involved in the agenda setting. She appeared content to remain non-influential and noted that if she were expected to be more influential, she would consider resigning.

The parent representative from the Daviston council resented the treatment of some of her fellow council members and occasionally chose to withdraw from discussions. She did this rather than deal with what she perceived was a lack of respect being accorded her by some members of the council. She described intimidation factors, such as rolling of the eyes when she spoke and comments belittling her contributions, as means used to limit her role on the council. She had considered resigning but felt determined to fight through the difficulty. She believed being a part of this study and having someone listen to her concerns had added determination to her cause. She felt it was important to “be brave” and let others know that she had opinions and wanted to be respected.

According to this individual, not being a member of the social elite meant that your contributions were not valued and that you were perceived to have little in the way of status or knowledge. She felt this lack of respect was not limited to the school council but was characteristic of many aspects of community life where the influence of the social elite could be felt. She felt that was a contradiction given that her community was “one of the last lands of opportunity” and a place where people came to make things happen.

Sarason’s (1995) theory of asset and deficit perception provided further insight into the alienation felt by this individual. He noted that individuals who seek participation in organizations such as school councils see themselves as assets in the

decision-making process. They believe they have knowledge and understanding which can support the work of the collective group. When others do not recognize or acknowledge those assets, however, problems occur. For as Sarason (1995, p. 40) noted,

Where in “real life” the problem begins is the inability, or reluctance or refusal to regard those whose views are different than yours, or who have a different status than you do, or whose relevant experience you deem nonexistent, as a justification for giving them a role in the decision-making process.

You do not see them as having assets, and therefore their participation will muddy the waters, prolong the process, and increase the level of controversy. That stance does not derive only from considerations of power; there is more to it than that, and the “more” is that these people are seen as having nothing to contribute in the way of ideas or knowledge or experience.

When viewed within this context, I believe much of the respondent’s experiences with the Daviston council can be explained. The members of the social elite appeared to view their own knowledge as assets, assets they derived from being professionals or influential members of the community. They believed these assets, in the form of knowledge, should not only be shared with the council but become the basis of the council’s decision making. They did not appear willing, however, to accept the knowledge or input of people with life-experiences different from themselves. The result of this unwillingness was a constant battle to keep their ideas at the forefront of discussions and to use whatever tactics were available to limit the influence of others whom they deemed unlike themselves.

The non-influential respondent saw herself as having many assets to bring to the group. She spoke at length about the specific knowledge she brought from her job that could be directly applied to the work being done by the council. Because she was not classified as a professional, however, she believed the social elite were not willing to recognize that knowledge. Her assets were not being recognized and, perhaps more detrimentally, her status as parent was seen as a deficit. According to the literature, such lack of recognition for acquired skills or knowledge is a common problem. St. John et al. (1997) believed that educators “need to find better ways to let these other voices

emerge, the voices that will enable us to construct new collective understandings” (p. 90).

According to Morgan (1989), one way to increase parental involvement in school-based decision making is to dispel the perception or mystique of teacher professionalism. That mystique, often promoted by the lay community, sees teachers with unique powers; the “power of sorcerers, rainmakers or hypnotists” to make people anxious about their hold on life. Morgan believed dispelling this mystique would enable parents to feel more comfortable in school settings. He also believed it would remove some of the hostility and suspicion that currently exist toward parent and community involvement in schools.

In this situation, dispelling that mystique may have helped the non-influential member of the Daviston council see herself in a more empowering and able role. With this increased sense of self, she may have been better able to promote the assets she brought to the council. Without it, it is likely that disillusionment and eventual separation from the council would occur. For as Pfeffer (1995) noted, when individuals see little hope of being able to exert influence, political action becomes limited and people are content to remain on an organization’s periphery.

Bridging the Relational Gap Between Roles and Expectations

Restructuring, of which school council implementation is one aspect, is not an easy process. For as McLeese (reported in Malen and Ogawa, 1992) noted, people are often excited about its prospects but the initial energizing effect tends to be offset by confusion, anxiety and contention. Dissonance and resentment can also surface when participants perceive they only have modest influence on marginal matters. According to McLeese, what often happens is that exhaustion overcomes enthusiasm and the human costs overshadow the ideological appeals, leaving participants feeling more drained than inspired and more overburdened than empowered.

Many individuals hoped parents in the Kettle Creek School District would become increasingly involved in decision making at the local school level. However, for those who envisioned great changes in parental influence, confusion and frustration often surrounded their efforts. More than overcoming resistance to change or understanding

the language and customs of schools, most respondents felt the greatest obstacle to doing so was the lack of definitive guidelines from the province. They believed that without clear guidelines delineating the extent and limitations of their powers, they were unlikely to change the face of education in this province. They often struggled with the legal consequences of their actions and whether or not they had the right to set policies in curricular or financial areas. And, if the province were not willing to clearly define those boundaries, many questioned whether they would continue their involvement with the school council.

Malen and Ogawa (1992, p. 191) noted that ambiguity in site-based management is a common occurrence. They believed that policy makers keep such changes to the existing political structure ambiguous because they are "technically troublesome and politically risky," often rekindling the "who controls what debate," and evoking administrator-teacher and professional-patron disputes. Rather than rekindling debates, they appeared to increase the frustration level for all involved in school councils. Those frustrations were often based on uncertainties about "where the power would lie" in any new relationship being forged between school boards, teachers and school councils. Malen and Ogawa (1992, pp. 192-193) noted such feelings were not only understandable, but commonplace.

When these plans are little more than vague references to elusive but appealing notions of empowerment and participation, site actors have no basis for determining whether they have any greater power to affect schools than they possessed before the plan was adopted . . . When site participants are not clear on the parameters of power, or when they are not convinced that they have been given greater power, they become frustrated by the ambiguity, skeptical of the new arrangements, and disillusioned by the pretense of reform.

Perhaps those most disillusioned were those with the most to gain in terms of influence. The members of the social elite expressed great frustration with the province for not defining the extent and limitations of their powers. Some wondered if the province really wanted change, or if it were just rhetoric. Others believed they did, but felt the province was leaving it to parents to battle with schools and school boards for

influence in areas previously viewed as within the realm of professional responsibility and expertise.

Unfortunately for the social elite, they were not a part of the district's planning sessions when such issues were debated between principals and school council chairs. They were also not aware of the results of these meetings, as they noted these results had not been communicated to them by the district or their council. If this information had been available, or if they had been a part of the process, it is possible the social elite's frustration with the delineation of responsibilities may have lessened. Meanwhile, many wondered if their busy lives filled with other commitments and demands would eventually lead them away from school council involvement and into other areas where roles and expectations were more clearly defined.

Recent developments in the province of Alberta indicated that little has changed since this study was conducted in December 1994. According to the final report of the Minister's Forums on School Councils, released in August 1999, 66 % of school council members reported struggling to understand their roles and responsibilities. Many also believed they lacked meaningful input or impact into areas in which they chose to be involved. Recommendations emerging from the report included changing school council regulations to make principals and teachers non-voting members of school councils. In support of that change, the report noted "school councils have matured greatly and are now ready to go on to their next level of development" (Alberta Learning, 1999). If this study is an indication of the potential disillusionment felt by school council members who were assumed to be more knowledgeable or influential than they believed to be personally true, it should provide a cautionary overtone to those proposed changes.

Conclusion

Sarason (1995) noted that beneath the surface appearance of unity and hope for increased parental involvement in schools lies confusion and anger, vested interests intent on maintaining the status quo and a lack of clarity about means and ends. Those sentiments were certainly expressed in this study. Central to the study's findings

appeared to be the notion of shared influence as professionals and nonprofessionals alike struggled with what school councils should look and feel like. And at the core of those struggles was a belief that there were two discrete entities involved in the decision making process—those with knowledge of schools and those without.

Those without knowledge (or with limited knowledge) were welcome to participate in both councils. Nevertheless, it was questionable how seriously others sought their thoughts or ideas on salient policy issues. This was not so for those with knowledge, however, for their involvement was not only sought but expected. And yet, despite the inevitable conflicts and problems associated with those differences, I believe cooperation and increased communication were beginning to be evidenced in both councils. Like Fullan (1993), however, I believe these two aspects do not go deeply enough when changes in relationships between schools and parents are being attempted. I believe the important next step, and the one on which this innovation's success rests, is that of true collaboration.

Schrage (1990) defined true collaboration as a process of *shared creation* where individuals interact to create a shared understanding which no one had previously possessed or could have come to on their own. To do so requires not giving up, or giving in, as some respondents might have believed, but a genuine belief and trust in the ability of others to be an integral part of the decision making process. Perhaps the absence of true collaboration should not be a surprise. Its growth requires a very fertile ground and one which takes much tending, trust and belief on the part of all participants. And, as Dolan (1994) noted, you cannot take a situation of a non-relationship or a mistrustful one, and expect it to improve without going through the discomfort of building a new relationship.

I believe Daviston and Willow Ridge schools were interested in bridging the relational gaps that existed between their schools, parents and communities. Nevertheless, they appeared to be tentatively holding on to a semblance of traditionalism where administrators and teachers made most decisions. Changing the culture of schools, as the literature reveals, requires patience, persistence and a clear understanding of the

goal for which school councils might be the means. And that goal, according to the respondents I talked to, appeared to be creating greater partnerships and enhancing the learning opportunities for all students.

It is unlikely that goal will be realized, however, if school councils continue to involve a handful of parents representing very small segments of their communities. Communities and schools in the Kettle Creek School District must find ways to encourage more parents, especially those of minority and lower socio-economic status, to become involved in education, whether it be through membership on school councils or through less formalized means. Doing so will not guarantee greater student success, however it may be a first step in encouraging greater awareness from administrators and teachers of the importance of parent and community involvement in schools. It may also give parents and community members a greater understanding of what goes on in schools and provide a greater feeling of ownership for some of the more difficult issues facing schools today.

And when that happens, Willow Ridge and Daviston Composite schools will have entered into a position of shared influence with their parents and communities; influence that does not disempower others or attempt to gain advantage over others but focuses on *power with* rather than *power over* (Weeks, 1992). When boundaries between professionals and parents become more permeable and when mutual influence becomes an integral part of the collective practices and understandings of the Kettle Creek School District—that is when the relational gaps between the schools, their communities and their parents will have been forged. And that is when school democratization will occur. For as Glickman noted, (1993, p. 42) it requires a place where

. . . communication is open, people are listened to, and decisions are always made with carefully solicited input . . . where the authoritarian and dependency mantle, no matter how benevolent and caring, has been consciously dismantled because everyone knows that final decisions will be made in a manner by which every vote is equal, and those in status positions will have the same rights and responsibilities to influence decisions but, in the end, can win or lose as easily as anyone else.

To achieve those ends it is important to note that the essence of all organizational change is personal change (Eaton, 1996). Looking for change within ourselves, and in the ways in which we relate to one other, will be a necessary first step to realizing such goals. For as Gorbachev (1995, p. 34), former leader of the Soviet Union reminded us,

In the final analysis the main source of our troubles is not outside but within us, in our attitudes toward one another, toward society, and nature. All the rest derives from that. We must first change ourselves through self-education . . . and interaction. And having changed ourselves, we must come together in all our diversity to build a new world.

Recommendations and Implications

The conclusions drawn in this research lead to several recommendations, which, if implemented, will have implications for present and future practice. These recommendations and their implications are discussed in the following sections.

Recommendations for Practice

When viewed in its totality, this study presents recommendations, not only for practicing administrators, but also prospective administrators, teachers, trustees, central office personnel and parents. Those recommendations include the following:

- ▶ Alberta Education and local school boards should create a public awareness campaign highlighting the importance of school councils and parent and community involvement. This may reduce the burden of involvement from those community members who are already heavily involved in other aspects of community life.
- ▶ School districts must encourage schools to have more democratic representation on their school councils, focusing upon the inclusion of parent representation from minority, native and lower socio-economic groups.

- ▶ Provincial legislation must clarify the roles, responsibilities and legal limitations for school councils including who has the authority and responsibility for final decision making.
- ▶ Teachers must be included in any efforts directed at establishing the roles and responsibilities of parents in the decision making process. To deny them representation and the opportunity to present their views will only serve to create unnecessary fear and apprehension.
- ▶ Once the roles and responsibilities are determined, school councils must make student achievement their top priority. They must conduct frequent assessments to ensure a continual focus on achievement, rather than on politics. If not, the school council initiative will become a political reform where the council spends its time deciding who is empowered and who is not.
- ▶ University leadership programs and district inservicing should focus on helping prospective or current principals create effective working relationships between schools and their communities. Effective communication skills, public relations and group dynamic skills, collaborative decision making, and relationship building strategies should be components of those efforts.
- ▶ Schools and school districts should have comprehensive strategies to build the knowledge and skills of all participants involved in school councils. This should include training for principals, teachers and parents on their new roles and role relationships, including topics related to operations (meeting protocol, setting agendas, and orienting new members), communication (dealing with complaints, channels for problem resolution,

effective listening), improved effectiveness (setting missions and goals, collaborative processes for decision making, and managing conflict) and school council policies (roles and responsibilities, the mandate of school councils and the legal context for decision making).

Recommendations for Research

This study attempted to understand the reality of participation for members of two school councils. In doing so, certain delimitations were placed on the study. Because of this, further research in the following areas may serve to increase our understanding of this and related topics. The recommendations are as follows:

- ▶ As this was a qualitative study dealing with a limited number of participants, replication studies would enable generalizations to be made regarding the reality of participation for school councils in similar settings. With an expanded participant base, identifying factors in those settings that contribute to feelings of influence and non-influence may be possible.
- ▶ Because this study was limited to councils in the beginning stages of implementation, studying councils that are further along in their implementation may be beneficial. In doing so, it may be possible to determine if the growth inhibiting factors identified in this study are restricted to early implementation efforts or if they continue to plague councils throughout their existence.
- ▶ This study limited itself to understanding the perspective of school council chairs, teacher and parent representatives, principals and one superintendent. Of interest to others may be the perspective of other stakeholders affected by this innovation such as students, school board members and parents who are not members of school councils. In doing

so, greater insight into the effect of this innovation on the greater school community might be gained.

Implications for Research and Practice

The previous recommendations, if implemented, have implications for practice and research. Those implications are as follows.

- ▶ School councils that reflect a democratic representation of their community will provide schools with a greater understanding of parental needs and expectations. Unheard voices and views possibly different from those of professionals will be involved in the decision making process.
- ▶ All stakeholders involved in schools will know and understand the extent and limitation of their roles. Because of this, there will be less indecision and more focused effort in all areas of decision making.
- ▶ School council meetings will look and sound different, as schools try to more closely reflect the diverse nature of their communities. For some, this may mean a less structured approach to decision making, for others it may mean finding meeting places other than the school to encourage reluctant parents.
- ▶ Rather than studying existing school council members and their communities, research will focus on those who do not sit on the council, attempting to find alternative ways for schools to reach out to these individuals and encourage their formal involvement in school decision making. Of particular interest will be immigrant, native and lower socio-economic groups.

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Appendix A

Legislation Respecting School Councils Province of Alberta, School Amendment Act 1994

Section 17 is repealed and the following is substituted:

School Councils

- 17 (1) A school council shall be established in accordance with the regulations for each school operated by a board.
- (2) The majority of the members of a school district shall be parents of students enrolled in the school;
- (3) A school council shall
 - (a) advise the principal and the board respecting any matter relating to the school,
 - (b) perform any duty or function delegated to it by the board in accordance with the delegation
 - (c) ensure the students in the school have the opportunity to meet the standards of education set by the Minister,
 - (d) ensure the fiscal management of the school is in accordance with the requirements of the board and the superintendent, and
 - (e) do anything that is required to do under the regulations.
- (4) Subject to the regulations, a school council may make and implement policies in the school that the council considers necessary to carry out its responsibilities under subsection (3) including but not limited to policies respecting
 - (a) the nature of the programs offered,
 - (b) the expenditure of money,
 - (c) the educational standards to be met by students, and
 - (d) the management of the school.
- (5) A school council may make by-laws governing its meetings and the conduct of its affairs.
- (6) Subject to the regulations, a board may develop and implement policies respecting school councils.
- (7) The Minister, on the request of the board, may dissolve a school council without notice at any time if the Minister is of the opinion that the school council is not carrying out its responsibilities in accordance with this Act and the regulations.

Section 17 presently reads:

- 17 (1) Parents of students attending a school may establish a school council for that school.
- (2) The majority of the members of the school council must be parents of students attending that school.
- (3) A school council may
 - (a) advise the principal of the school and the board respecting any matter relating to the school, and
 - (b) perform any duty or function delegated to it by the board under section 45 in accordance with the delegation.
- (4) The parents of students attending a school may dissolve the school council of that school in accordance with rules respecting the dissolution of the school council.
- (5) The board shall make rules respecting the establishment of a school council, the election of members and the dissolution of the school council.
- (6) A school council may, subject to any rules made under this section, make by-laws governing its meetings and the business and conduct of its affairs.

Appendix B

Current Legislation Respecting School Councils Province of Alberta, School Amendment Act 1995

(Changes or additions to Section 17, 1994 are bolded, deletions have been crossed out).

School Councils

- 17 (1) A school council shall be established in accordance with the regulations for each school operated by a board.
- (2) The majority of the members of a school district shall be parents of students enrolled in the school;
- (3) **A board of a separate school district or a division made up only of separate school districts, by resolution, may require that the parents of students enrolled in a school operated by the board who are members of the school council must also be of the same faith as those who established the separate school districts, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic.**
- (4) A school council shall
 - (a) advise the principal and the board respecting any matter relating to the school,
 - (b) perform any duty or function delegated to it by the board in accordance with the delegation
 - (c) **consult with the principal so that the principal may** ensure the students in the school have the opportunity to meet the standards of education set by the Minister,
 - (d) **consult with the principal so that the principal may** ensure the fiscal management of the school is in accordance with the requirements of the board and the superintendent, and
 - (e) do anything that is required to do under the regulations.
- (5) Subject to the regulations, a school council may make and implement policies in the school that the council considers necessary to carry out its **functions.** ~~responsibilities under subsection (3) including but not limited to policies respecting~~
 - ~~(a) the nature of the programs offered,~~
 - ~~(c) the educational standards to be met by students, and~~
 - ~~(d) the management of the school.~~
- (6) A school council may make by-laws governing its meetings and the conduct of its affairs.
- (7) Subject to the regulations, a board may develop and implement policies respecting school councils.
- (7.1) **A board shall establish an appeal process or conflict resolution procedure under which the principal or the school council may apply respecting disputes on policies proposed or adopted for the school.**
- (8) The Minister, on the request of the board, may dissolve a school council without notice at any time if the Minister is of the opinion that the school council is not carrying out its responsibilities in accordance with this Act and the regulations.

- (9) **The Minister may make regulations**
- (a) **respecting the election or appointment of the members of a school council and the term or other conditions of election or appointment and the dissolution of a school council;**
 - (b) **respecting the roles of the principal and the school council of a school and their respective powers, duties and responsibilities;**
 - (c) **respecting any other matter the Minister considers necessary respecting school councils;**
 - (d) **exempting a school or a class of schools from the application of this section.**

Powers of Boards

44(1) A board must

- (b) in respect of its operations
 - (i) keep in force a policy or policies of insurance,
 - (ii) with the approval of the Minister, participate in an arrangement under Part 15 of the *Insurance Act*, or
 - (iii) with the approval of the Minister, participate in an alternative arrangement acceptable to the Minister,
 for the purpose of indemnifying the board and its employees **and school councils** in respect of claims for
 - (iv) damages for death or personal injury,
 - (v) damages to property, and
 - (vi) damages to property owned by the board in respect of which the board has an insurable interest
 - (A) that the board has agreed to insure, or
 - (B) for which the board otherwise has or may have assumed liability in an amount and form prescribed by the Minister;

Appendix C

Interview Questions

1. Why did you decide to become a member of your school council?
2. Were you elected or nominated? If elected, what was the turnout like at the election? If nominated, how did that work?
3. Why do you think you were chosen?
4. What pleases you the most about your role on council?
5. What, if anything, frustrates you?
6. What does it mean to you to be a parent representative [chair, teacher representative, principal] on your council? What do you believe your primary role is? How did you come to understand this role? Has your understanding of your role changed since you began? If so, in what way?
7. Can you tell me about a time when you felt you were successfully fulfilling your role on council? Was there ever a time when you felt constrained in fulfilling your role? If so, why do you think that happened?
8. What kinds of issues does your council discuss? How involved do you tend to get in the discussions? How do you decide when to get involved in a discussion? Have you ever brought an issue to the council? If so, what was it about and how was it received by the rest of the council? Would you do it again? Why or why not? What criteria would you use in deciding to bring up an issue?
9. Are you aware of the extent of your roles and responsibilities as a member of the school council? If so, what do you believe they are? If not, has that affected your role on the school council in any way?
10. Is there anything that concerns you about school councils, either as they exist today, or as they may exist in the future? Why do you believe that is so?
11. Is there anything else you would like to say to help me understand your role and experiences as a member of your school council?

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